

**THE COMEDIES OF OPERA SERIA:
HANDEL'S POST-ACADEMY OPERAS, 1738-1744**

A Dissertation
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ABSTRACT

The Comedies of Opera Seria: Handel's Post-Academy Operas, 1738-1744

This dissertation explores the ways in which Handel's late operas intersect with other forms of theater in mid-eighteenth-century London. It seeks to explain how certain comic features of these late works—from the lighter subject matter of the libretti to Handel's unconventional musical settings—can be seen to echo the heated criticism leveled at Italian opera seria during this period, criticism usually voiced by satirical pamphlets and operatic parodies. It concludes that so-called “serious opera” was not always taken too seriously by London audiences, or even by Handel himself. Instead, opera reception in eighteenth-century London was much more complex, sometimes even contradictory: avid operagoers were often generous patrons of operatic burlesque, and considered ridicule, disruption, and laughter an integral part of their operagoing experience. By tracing the points of contact between Italian opera and British theatrical life, this dissertation examines the ways in which the “comedies” of opera seria, both as historical phenomena and as potentially fruitful sites for theoretical investigation, offer a new picture of the eighteenth-century *dramma per musica*.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Musical Examples	vi
List of Figures	vii
 Introduction: The “Comedies” of Opera Seria	 1
The Case for Comedy: Handel’s Late Operas	5
Opera, Satire, and Print Culture	10
Theatres and Audiences in Handel’s London	15
 Chapter 1: Opera, Burlesque, and Self-Preservation	
Handel’s <i>Serse</i> on the British Stage	19
Absurdity, Noise, and Nonsense: Lowbrow Opera	30
Dumb Operas and Sung Ones	38
Opera, Burlesque, and Representation	42
Self-Burlesque and Self-Preservation: <i>Serse</i>	51
Thwarting Expectations	74
 Chapter 2: Laughter, Uproar, and the Suspension of (Dis)belief	
The London Opera Audience, 1710-1744	80
Accidents and Mishaps: Rupturing the Operatic Text	90
Opera Crazes and Empty Houses	98
Roars, Catcalls, and Other Fun: The Divas Scandal of 1727	104

Chapter 3: Reforming Handel

The Failed Heroics of Imeneo and Deidamia	116
Metastasio at the Crossroads	120
Love and Virtue at War	129
The Price of Reform: “Serious Opera”	145
Reforming the Reformers	160
 Chapter 4: Semele’s Death and the End of Opera	162
Competition and Opera Gossip, 1741-1744	175
Galant Laughter and Opera Parody	183
A Last Look in the Mirror	204
 Epilogue: <i>Semele</i> and the Twenty-First-Century Stage	206
 Bibliography	214

LIST OF MUSICAL EXAMPLES

Example 1.1: <i>Serse</i> , Act III, Scene 11, Aria. “Crude furie”	21
Example 1.2: <i>Serse</i> , Act II, Scene 2, Arietta, “Ah! tigre infedele”	56
Example 1.3: <i>Serse</i> , Act II, Scene 3. Aria. “Dirà che amor per me”	62
Example 1.4: <i>Serse</i> , Act II, Scene 3 (cont.)	64
Example 1.5: <i>Serse</i> , Act I, Scene 4, Aria. “Sì, sì mio ben”	68
Example 1.6: <i>Serse</i> , Act I, Scene 4, Aria. cont.	70
Example 1.7: <i>Serse</i> , Act I, Scene 12. Aria. “Non so se sia la speme”.....	77
Example 3.1: <i>Imeneo</i> , Act II, Scene 5, Aria. “Chi scherza colle rose”	132
Example 3.2: <i>Imeneo</i> , Act I, Scene 1, Aria. “Se potessero i sospir miei”	135
Example 3.3: <i>Imeneo</i> , Act I Chorus. “Vien’Imeneo fra voi” (opening)	138
Example 3.4: <i>Imeneo</i> , Act I Chorus, cont. (conclusion)	139
Example 3.5: <i>Imeneo</i> , Act III, Scene 8. Accompagnato, “Miratela che arriva”	147
Example 3.6: <i>Tamerlano</i> , Act III, Scene 9, Accompagnato (Bajazet)	148
Example 3.7: <i>Deidamia</i> , Act III, Scene 2, Aria. “M’ai resa infelice”.....	153
Example 3.8: <i>Deidamia</i> , Act III, Scene 2, Aria. cont. (B section)	154
Example 3.9: <i>Deidamia</i> , Act III, Scene 7, Chorus. “Non trascurate, amanti”	158
Example 4.1: <i>Semele</i> , Act III Aria, “Myself I shall adore”	166
Example 4.2: Porpora, <i>Temistocle</i> , “Contrasto assai”	187

Example 4.3: Porpora, <i>Temistocle</i> , “È specie di tormento”	188
Example 4.4: Arena, <i>Alessandro in Persia</i> , “Se d’un amor tiranno”	191
Example 4.5: <i>Semele</i> , Act I, Scene 1, “The morning lark”	193
Example 4.6: Veracini, <i>Adriano in Siria</i> , “Amor dover rispetto”	198
Example 4.7: <i>Semele</i> , Act III, Scene 4, “No, no I’ll take no less”	201

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: <i>The Dragon of Wantley</i> , Air. “Oh ho, Master Moore” (Dragon)	48
Figure 2: <i>Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser</i> , March 14, 1785	82
Figure 3: A. M. Zanetti, Caricature of Senesino (<i>n.d.</i>)	93
Figure 4: <i>The Daily Courant</i> , May 13, 1720	96
Figure 5: <i>The British Journal</i> , June 10, 1727	112
Figure 6: <i>The London Journal</i> , June 10, 1727	112
Figure 7: Annibale Carracci, <i>Ercole al Bivio</i> (1596)	125
Figure 8: Paolo di Matteis, <i>The Choice of Hercules</i> (1712)	126
Figure 9: <i>Semele</i> , Mirror Scene, Elizabeth Futral as Semele, dir. Stephen Lawless, New York City Opera, October 2006	210

INTRODUCTION

THE “COMEDIES” OF OPERA SERIA

A modern listener is easily puzzled by the tone of Handel’s librettos, and in particular by doubt as to how seriously they ought to be taken. Having heard them described as lofty and heroic, he may find it difficult not to laugh in the wrong place, or what he suspects is the wrong place. He deserves sympathy. The whole convention is apt to seem absurd today; and it is all too easy in a stage performance to turn serious scenes into farce or ironical episodes into empty heroics.¹

With these words Winton Dean opened the seventh chapter of his *Handel and the Opera Seria*, the first major study of Handel’s operas, and in so doing he might have summarized the entire history of operatic reception from the seventeenth century to the present day. Opera, perhaps more than any other art form, has always run the risk of offering uncertain, even contradictory, meanings as its multifarious media compete for attention and signification, and the laughter that Dean describes has always threatened to charge opera’s unique form of expression with sentimental excess or grotesque artificiality. In the case of Dean, however, who was among the first scholars to treat Handel’s operas as serious objects of study, this unease about a potentially destabilizing “misreading” was particularly felt. After all, for two centuries music historiography had viewed Handel’s operas as bizarre curiosities at best, whose convoluted plots, rigid conventions, and

¹ Winton Dean, *Handel and the Opera Seria* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 100.

empty displays of virtuosity, not to mention their castrated and cross-dressing stars, served only as embarrassing reminders of a decadent absolutist past.

Since the time of Joseph Kerman's grim pronouncement about "the dark ages of opera"²—the period of operatic history between Monteverdi's death and Gluck's reforms of the 1760s—scholars have worked vigorously to dispel such a perception.³ It was the task of twentieth-century musicology to take *opera seria* seriously, a project that has remained central to Handel scholarship ever since. For the first time, Handel's operas were to be considered "complex and sophisticated unities," not only worthy of study on their own terms, but also as viable competitors on the twentieth-century stage. Once seen as a secondary, even marginal composer associated more with English choral music than with the theater, Handel would become a brilliant dramatist, ranking, in the words of Dean and John Merrill Knapp, "with Monteverdi, Mozart, and Verdi among the supreme masters of opera."⁴ And as the immense popularity of Handel's operas in recent years has shown, the effort to promote Handel-as-dramatist seems to have worked: never before have the composer's stage works enjoyed so much success in the theater, not even in Handel's own time, and recent productions, revivals, and commercial audio and video releases flourish with no end in sight.

² Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956).

³ Winton Dean, "The Recovery of Handel's Operas," in *Music in Eighteenth-Century England: Essays in Memory of Charles Cudworth*, eds. Christopher Hogwood and Richard Lockett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 107.

⁴ Winton Dean and John Merrill Knapp, *Handel's Operas, 1704-1726* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 1.

While reading recent accounts of Handel's operas, however, one cannot help but notice a striking discrepancy between the vision of Handel offered in academic literature and the one presented on the twenty-first-century stage. The sober, severe works described by scholars like Dean—noble, profound, and full of great dramatic subtlety—are more likely to be staged today as irreverent comedy, or even coarse burlesque, in which the heroic sentiments of eighteenth-century *opera seria* are all too often turned into objects of gross ridicule. A Munich production of Handel's *Rinaldo* from 2001, for example, presented the chaste Almirena dressed in a nun's habit, singing a duet with her lover while salaciously waving a pair of palm frond pom-poms; in a 2006 performance of *Semele* in New York, the title role was transformed into a bubbly, vacuous Marilyn Monroe, her rival, Juno, into a jealous Jackie Kennedy; and a Glimmerglass production of *Acis and Galatea* featured the giant Polifemus executing Michael Jackson dance moves in a red helmet lamp and grimy overalls while contemplating Galatea's "ruddy cherry."⁵ The examples are seemingly endless, and continue to proliferate as new productions are mounted every year.

This kind of comic staging is obviously not new to the operatic stage, nor is it exclusively a Handelian phenomenon, but it seems to have become more consistently associated with early music than with other operatic repertoires, for example, those of the

⁵ *Rinaldo*, Bayerischer Rundfunk, 2001, dir. David Alden, cond. Harry Bicket, with David Daniels (Rinaldo) and Deborah York (Almirena), released on DVD by Kultur (ISBN 0-7697-2908-8); *Semele*, New York City Opera, 2006, dir. Stephen Lawless, cond. Anthony Walker, with Elizabeth Futral (Semele) and Vivica Genaux (Juno); *Acis and Galatea*, Glimmerglass Opera, 2000, dir. Mark Lamos, cond. Ransom Wilson, with Philippe Castagner (Acis), Sarah Jane McMahon (Galatea), and Jason Hardy (Polyphemus).

nineteenth century, whose tendency towards irreconcilably tragic plots have proven more resistant to lighter dressing (if not to modern reinventions). As Richard Taruskin has pointed out, moreover, late twentieth-century reconsiderations of early performance practice have changed the way we listen to this repertory, imparting a “newness” to old music that has fostered the seemingly contradictory popular image of Handel and his contemporaries as “modern” or cutting-edge.⁶ This may strike some as odd considering the immense efforts musicians have made to recreate a “historically informed” eighteenth-century sound-world, down to the precise quarter-tone of Baroque tuning and the correct number of theorbos in the continuo. If the idea is to recreate Handel’s music *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*—“musical truthfulness” is the catchphrase used by period violinist Fabio Biondi⁷—why all the pom-poms and the overalls?

The point has not been lost on Handel scholars, many of whom have been surprisingly blunt in their rejection of what has variously been called “ignorance,” “irrelevant distraction,” “anachronism,” and “the lust to exploit a hyperactive ego” in modern *mise-en-scène*.⁸ Donald Burrows, while expressing his immense gratitude for the renewed public interest in Handel’s operas, has nonetheless declared that “when gesture and the stage picture are at odds with the style of the music, Handel would usually have

⁶ Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁷ From Biondi’s short biography provided by the Los Angeles Philharmonic Association (available online at <http://www.laphil.com/resources/performer_detail.cfm?id=1864>. (accessed November 19, 2010). This is identical to the program description accompanying many of Biondi’s appearances with his period ensemble, Europa Galante, during their 2004 American tour.

⁸ Dean, “Production Style in Handel’s Operas,” in Donald Burrows, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Handel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 257.

been better served with a concert performance.”⁹ Dean is less generous: “What these productions have in common is a desolating vulgarity and a contempt for the opera as a work of art.”¹⁰ Although some have been more outspoken than others, many seem to agree with the basic argument: Baroque opera and comedy don’t mix. To allow this, the reasoning goes, not only violates the principles of eighteenth-century aesthetics but threatens to undermine forty years of effort dedicated to rescuing Handel’s operas from such an interpretation.

THE CASE FOR COMEDY: HANDEL’S LATE OPERAS

There is another story here, one that remains largely untold and one that is the primary focus of this dissertation. For despite the purported “seriousness” of opera seria, many of Handel’s operas contain moments that closely resemble the theatrical effects created by these modern productions: moments of levity, of rupture, of self-awareness, even of self-parody. In *Deidamia*, for instance, the young Achilles, dressed as a girl on Skyros, is flattered by the amorous advances of Ulysses, much to the horror of his fiancée. In the third act of *Semele*, Somnus, the drowsy god of slumber, falls asleep halfway through his own aria, missing the obligatory *da capo* repeat. And then, of course, there is Serse, the lecherous buffoon-king who lovingly sings one of Handel’s most cherished arias, “Ombra mai fu,” to a tree.

⁹ Burrows, “Introduction” to *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, 7.

¹⁰ Dean, “Production Style,” 258.

This dissertation seeks to better understand these comic moments by considering how they relate to other forms of popular theater in eighteenth-century London. In particular, I consider how such moments were perceived by London audiences, what they have in common with English comic theater and rival Italian operas of the time, and what they might tell us about Handel, about eighteenth-century views of Italian opera, and about operatic performance in general. By tracing the points of contact between Italian opera and British theatrical life, I examine the ways in which the “comedies” of opera seria, both as historical phenomena and as potentially fruitful sites for theoretical investigation, offer a new picture of the eighteenth-century *dramma per musica*.

A brief overview of the historical evidence will give an idea of what such a picture might look like. It is well-known that Handel spent his early career writing semi-serious, mixed-language operas for the Hamburg theaters, which featured mock-heroic and lower-class characters in often absurd situations, and that he carried this practice into his first international success, *Agrippina*, written for Venice in 1710. Much of the same music would reappear as borrowed material in the spectacular London premiere of *Rinaldo* the following year. These formative years would prove to have a lasting impact on Handel’s reputation as an opera composer as well as on his idiosyncratic musical style.¹¹ A number of subsequent works, which Winton Dean has labeled Handel’s “anti-heroic”

¹¹ See Donald Burrows, *Handel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 17-20, 57-59, 83-84; Dean and Knapp, *Handel’s Operas, 1704-1726*, 38-77, 114-205.

operas, also contain similar playful qualities: *Flavio* (1723), *Partenope* (1730), and *Orlando* (1733) fit into this category.¹²

But it was only at the end of Handel's operatic career, immediately before he gave up writing opera altogether in favor of English oratorio, that he began to turn consistently to lighter subject-matter for his remaining operatic works: *Serse* (1738), *Imeneo* (1740), *Deidamia* (1741), and the English-language *Semele* (1744, a setting of an older opera libretto by William Congreve). What these late operas share is a tendency to confront the generic norms commonly associated with so-called "serious" opera. Some contain unambiguously comic characters and situations—the buffo servant Elviro in *Serse* and the dim-witted *basso profondo* Somnus from *Semele* are the most obvious examples—while others unmistakably poke fun at the rigid conventions of opera seria itself, featuring interrupted or fragmentary arias, exaggerated means of vocal expression, and wry reconfigurations of familiar musical forms. These final operas, written during a critical transitional period in Handel's career, are the focal point of this dissertation.

What these "post-Academy" operas share is a tendency to confront, and even contradict, many of the aesthetic norms that we commonly associate with opera seria. This is illustrated, among other evidence, by the wide variety of operatic terminology used during the 1730s and early 1740s. As Reinhard Strohm has noted, the term "opera seria" did not exist in Europe throughout most of the eighteenth century; far more

¹² Dean, *Handel and the Opera Seria*, 100.

common was “*dramma per musica*,” or in England, simply “opera.”¹³ Different generic designations, however, could be given to a work according to its style and subject-matter. Newspaper advertisements and contemporary letters during the first London performances of Handel’s *Imeneo*, for example, called the work an “operetta,” while at the Dublin premiere two years later the work was billed as a “serenata.” In 1741, Charles Jennens, who would compile the scriptural texts for *Messiah*, wondered whether Handel’s final opera, *Deidamia*, “would be turn’d into farce” due to the fact that a woman was playing the role of the hero Achilles. Three years later, Jennens called *Semele* “a bawdy [*sic*] opera,” in spite of its English libretto and Handel’s request that the work be performed “after the manner of an oratorio.” Equally suggestive is a letter of May 1738 by the Earl of Shaftesbury, who, in reference to *Serse*, wrote, “my own judgement [*sic*] is that it is a capital opera notwithstanding ‘tis called a ballad one.”

These distinctions suggest a more fluid notion of opera seria than is generally acknowledged today, one that draws upon a wide variety of generic discourses, from classical poetry and high tragedy to sentimental comedy and low farce. Indeed, it may be no accident that many of Handel’s lighter operas appeared not long after John Rich’s enormously successful *Beggar’s Opera* (1728), a work that not only remained immensely popular throughout Handel’s life, but also inspired a flood of similar works during one of the most prosperous and experimental periods in the history of British drama. By the time Robert Walpole passed the Licensing Act in 1737, which closed several theaters and

¹³ Reinhard Strohm, *Dramma per musica: Italian Opera Seria of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 1-4; Strohm, *Essays on Handel and Italian Opera*, 93-97.

required the Lord Chamberlain's approval of all stage works, more than eighty such "ballad operas" had been printed and performed in London theaters, many of them featuring Handel's own music and directly parodying Italian opera.¹⁴ Furthermore, after John Rich agreed in 1734 to sponsor Handel at his newly opened theater at Covent Garden, Handel's operas would literally share the stage with ballad opera and comic spoken theater on alternating nights.

Handel himself was well aware of Italian opera's position in London's theatrical culture, as evidenced by his aggressively competitive musical activities during the 1730s. Practically every work produced by Handel in these years either directly responded to another stage work or provoked a reaction by a competitor. When Handel discovered, for example, that unauthorized productions of his *Esther* and *Acis and Galatea* were being mounted in the spring of 1733, he revised and expanded both works to set up his own competing productions the same season. Similarly, when the Opera of the Nobility produced Porpora's *Arianna in Nasso* at Lincoln's Inn Fields that December, Handel responded with his own *Arianna in Creta* the following month, at the same time a revival of Motteux's *The Island Princess* was being mounted at Drury Lane. Handel's *Giustino* (1737), likewise, was directly parodied three months later in Henry Carey's burlesque,

¹⁴ On the popular use of Handel's music in ballad operas, see Berta Joncus, "Handel at Drury Lane: Ballad Opera and the Production of Kitty Clive," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 131 (2006): 179-226. In addition to *The Beggar's Opera*, the most popular ballad operas during these years were Charles Coffey's *The Devil to Pay* (1732) and *The Beggar's Wedding* (1729), Henry Fielding's *The Virgin Unmask'd* (1735), *The Mock Doctor* (1732), and *The Lottery* (1732), John Hipsley's *Flora, or Hob's Opera* (1729), Colley Cibber's *Damon and Phillida* (1731), and Henry Carey's *The Dragon of Wantley* (1737) and *The Honest Yorkshireman* (1736).

The Dragon of Wantley.¹⁵ Such examples show that Handel's operas were not isolated—physically, financially, or generically—from other kinds of theater at this time, but were constantly, and often explicitly, in dialogue with them.

Such a combination of factors encourages us to position Handel's operas within their broader theatrical culture, as only one of several kinds of musical entertainment staged nightly in various venues across London. By asking what these entertainments had in common, rather than assuming their mutual exclusivity, this dissertation tells an alternative story about the creation and reception of opera in early eighteenth-century London. By taking comedy seriously, I hope to show that the aesthetic sensibilities of modern audiences and directors are closer to those of the eighteenth century than we might think.

OPERA, SATIRE, AND PRINT CULTURE

How opera was perceived by the British public is not easy to determine. Popular tastes were diverse, opera factions tended to favor particular singers and composers over others, and eighteenth-century accounts of audience responses are often vague when available at all. Much of our knowledge of operatic reception in Handel's London comes from the

¹⁵ For political readings of the two *Ariannas* and *The Dragon of Wantley*, see Suzanne Aspden, "Ariadne's Clew: Politics, Allegory, and Opera in London (1734)," *Musical Quarterly* 85 (2001): 735-770; also see Aspden, "Ballads and Britons: Imagined Community and the Continuity of 'English' Opera," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 122 (1997): 24-51.

thousands of pamphlets, newspapers, and journals that were printed during these years.¹⁶ These have been important primary sources for this project, nearly 140,000 of which have been made newly accessible online, with full-text search capability, through Eighteenth-Century Collections Online (ECCO), in addition to over one million pages of newspapers from the Burney Newspaper collection, recently digitized by the British Library.¹⁷ The print documents of the 1720s and 1730s are of interest not only because printing restrictions and press censorship were virtually nonexistent at this time, but also, as Linda Colley has persuasively argued, because this period marks the moment when a newly united Britain was self-consciously forging a national identity, one centered around Whig values, English customs, and a Protestant faith.¹⁸

This print culture, and the political and religious views it fostered, would prove to play an important role in shaping British responses to Italian opera. Ruth Smith's particularly thought-provoking study of the oratorios identifies Britain's nascent national identity as a crucial component to the public appropriation and canonization of Handel's

¹⁶ Several important editions of music-related correspondence have been published, including Lady Llanover, ed., *Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs. Delany* (London: Richard Bentley, 1861); Donald Burrows and Rosemary Dunhill, eds., *Music and Theatre in Handel's World: The Family Papers of James Harris, 1732-1780* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); John Ginger, ed., *Handel's Trumpeter: The Diary of John Grano* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1998).

¹⁷ Eighteenth-Century Collections Online (ECCO) [Database], and 17th and 18th Century Burney Collection of Newspapers (Database), both available through Gale Group (<<http://galenet.galegroup.com>>, accessed August 23, 2012).

¹⁸ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). The now canonic studies of Britain's print culture as the birthplace of national identity and public political consciousness are Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983) and Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

sacred English works.¹⁹ Drawing on a vast body of print material, Smith ties commonly held attitudes about genre and style to broader ideas of nation, politics, and religious belief. By focusing on the metaphor of the ancient Hebrews as representative of the British people, Smith demonstrates that Handel's librettists not only associated England with Israel but also attempted to mold a new image of the Israelites that conformed to British ideals of a rational, "Enlightened" society. As a result of this nationalistic climate, Smith argues, many contemporary accounts of Italian opera in London tended to be overwhelmingly negative, a fact that she uses to explain the growing taste for English oratorio in the 1730s.

Other studies support Smith's conclusion. Henrik Knif's survey of daily journals circulating around the time of Handel's first arrival in London makes several important connections between open hostility to Italian opera and a rising literate merchant class that increasingly viewed Italy as a threat to British values.²⁰ Suzanne Aspden and Thomas McGeary have shown that, due to its origins in Catholic Europe and the prominence it granted to the castrato singer, Italian opera was commonly associated with luxury, effeminacy, irrationality, and corruption by contemporary Londoners, and was invariably denigrated in the public sermons and political debates raging in print around

¹⁹ Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). A similar argument about the reception and canonization of Handel's oratorios has been made by William Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics in Eighteenth-Century England: A Study in Canon, Ritual, and Ideology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

²⁰ Henrik Knif, *Gentlemen and Spectators: Studies in Journals, Opera and the Social Scene in Late Stuart London* (Helsinki: Finnish Historical Society, 1995).

this time.²¹ As Gary C. Thomas and Todd S. Gilman have demonstrated, moreover, these fears were extended to anxieties about gender and sexuality, the sin of sodomy having long been associated with the Catholic church and commonly thought to have originated in Italy.²²

These scholars have made immeasurable contributions to our understanding of early British reception of Italian opera, and have done so in ways that relate directly to the musical practices of the time. It is their kind of approach—wide-ranging historical and literary contextualization, careful source study, and judicious hermeneutical insight—that I have sought to emulate in this dissertation. Yet despite the deep cultural anxieties their work has uncovered, it does not fully account for the fact that Italian opera continued to be supported in London well into the 1740s and by many measures never went away. The chapters that follow offer another perspective on eighteenth-century opera reception, one that views the public censure of opera’s irrationality, absurdity, and effeminacy as pointing to aspects of Italian opera that were appreciated, or even

²¹ Aspden, “Ariadne’s Clew”; “Ballads and Britons”; “An Infinity of Factions: Opera in Eighteenth-Century London and the Undoing of Society,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 9 (1997): 1-19; “The ‘Rival Queens’ and the Play of Identity in Handel’s *Admeto*,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18 (2006): 301-31; “‘Fam’d Handel Breathing, Tho’ Transformed to Stone’: The Composer as Monument,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 55 (2002): 39-90; Thomas McGeary, “Farinelli in Madrid: Opera, Politics, and the War of Jenkins’ Ear,” *Musical Quarterly* 82 (1998) 383-421; McGeary, “‘Warbling Eunuchs’: Opera, Gender, and Sexuality on the London Stage, 1705-1742,” *Restoration and Eighteenth Century Theatre Research* 7 (1992): 1-22.

²² Gary C. Thomas, “‘Was George Frideric Handel Gay?’: On Closet Questions and Cultural Politics,” in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 1994), 155-204; Todd S. Gilman, “The Italian (Castrato) in London,” in *The Work of Opera: Genre, Nationhood, Sexual Difference*, ed. Richard Dellamora and Daniel Fischlin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997): 49-70.

celebrated, by its admirers, much as they were in the ballad operas and farcical burlesques put on nightly at Drury Lane. In this way my project reexamines many of the print documents that have been the focus of previous studies—particularly the satirical works that attack opera directly—with the idea of reading them “against the grain,” to see what critiques of opera might tell us about the audiences who enjoyed it.

If my comic readings seem to stand at odds with some of the musicological literature on Handel’s operas, then perhaps the discrepancy lies in the living experience of performance itself: in the perceived absurdities that arise when a theatrical performance appears to contradict the story it is telling, or when abstract forms of musical expression seem incongruous with naturalistic dialogue and stage action. Nathan Link’s recent dissertation, which explores the conflicts that often occur between narrative storytelling and theatrical representation in Handel’s operas, provides a useful framework to consider how such dramatic ruptures might give way to comic effects in live performance.²³ As such, my project intersects with more current trends in opera and performance studies that reconsider how theatrical “works” are constituted, as ephemeral, collaborative efforts between active agents rather than faithful recreations of an inviolable text. Such considerations open a space for comedy in Handel’s operas by framing these operas not as singular unities fixed in a score and libretto but as dynamic events, whose many

²³ Nathan Link, “Story and Representation in Handel’s Operas” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2006), 11. This approach is exemplified by the work of Roger Parker, most recently in *Remaking the Song: Operatic Visions and Revisions from Handel to Berio* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006).

meanings can resonate simultaneously at the level of the text, the performance, and the audience itself. This, I believe, is what links Handel's operas to their twenty-first-century incarnations, and may ultimately prove to bridge the gap between his time and our own.

THEATERS AND AUDIENCES IN HANDEL'S LONDON

My first chapter fleshes out the theatrical scene in 1730s London, and lays the foundation for a historical consideration of comedy in Handel's late operas. I first summarize some common critiques of Italian opera that appeared in the British press during the 1730s, a particularly volatile period of British theater history, when opera was considered by many an inferior form of theater, belonging with the fashionable entertainments—dance, pantomime, ballad opera, even puppet shows—popularized by men like John Rich over the 1720s and 1730s. The chapter then turns to a discussion of Handel's *Serse* (1738), a work that more closely resembles British comic theater, and even operatic self-parody, than so-called “serious” opera. I conclude that in *Serse* we might see Handel's first attempts to reconcile Italian opera, and indeed, his own career, with the much-changed taste of London theatergoers. Specifically, in *Serse* Handel turns irreverent mockery of Italian opera into the very means for its preservation.

Chapter Two turns to a broad consideration of eighteenth-century British audiences: those inattentive, irreverent theatergoers whose loud card games and obnoxious

conversations are familiar to almost every student of music today. Where musicologists have tended to invoke the antics of Baroque audiences as merely a historical curiosity, however, in this chapter I attempt to expose the very real consequences that uncouth audience behavior would have had on operatic performance. By examining a number of botched productions and unplanned audience reactions as they occurred at various points in Handel's career—including his first operatic successes in London and the infamous diva scandal of 1727—the chapter investigates how the frequent accusations of absurdity leveled at opera by its detractors had real corollaries in live operatic performance, and indeed, that such absurdities were enjoyed by contemporary audiences.

My third chapter explores the ways in which Handel's final two operas, *Imeneo* (1740) and *Deidamia* (1741), fit oddly into the operatic reforms championed by Metastasio and his imitators during the 1720s and 30s, when composers and librettists began to turn away from plots centered on love and toward those that reinforced "heroic" values such as reason, honor, and civic responsibility. Although Handel's two last works seem to make many gestures toward reform—neither ends, for example, with a reconciliation between the young lovers—they also demonstrate a highly ambivalent attitude toward the masculine values that scholars have identified as instrumental to operatic reform in this period. Written when Handel was conscious that his operatic career was coming to an end, *Imeneo* and *Deidamia* might even be said to betray Handel's own sense of loss over Baroque opera's passing.

My final chapter considers the unusual case of Handel's *Semele* (1743), a work that is neither in Italian nor technically an opera, but is arguably one of the most "operatic" works that Handel ever wrote, most notably because of its large number of *da capo* arias and the work's wild coloratura writing for the title role. I explore the ways in which *Semele*'s resemblance to Italian opera—and its heroine's even more striking resemblance to the proverbial *prima donna*—are implicated in the bizarre circumstances surrounding *Semele*'s premiere, when Handel found himself competing with a rival opera company set up by Lord Middlesex. The chapter compares Handel's music to the lighter Italian style of the Middlesex operas, and explores the ways in which *Semele*'s operatic features might be seen to confront, or even attack, the works of Handel's Italian competitors.

Each chapter takes a very different approach in addressing the variously comic aspects of Handel's late operas, positioning these works among a wide variety of theatrical practices. I consider how the late operas can be seen as a reaction to British ballad opera and comic theater of the 1730s (Chapter 1), a response to the lighter galant style just arriving in London during these years (Chapter 4), and as a commentary on the changing literary status of the genre that would not be called "opera seria" until long after the 1740s (Chapter 3). Taken together, these chapters reveal how the "comedies" of opera seria are present not only in the operatic text, formed during the creation of these operas, but also emerge in unexpected ways in both their performance and their reception,

and each represents a different facet of Handel's output during this transitional part of his career.

CHAPTER 1

OPERA, BURLESQUE, AND SELF-PRESERVATION: HANDEL'S *SERSE* ON THE BRITISH STAGE

In 1755, Samuel Johnson defined “catastrophe” as “the change or revolution which produces the final event of a dramattick piece; a final event, generally unhappy.”²⁴ The term can be traced back to the fourth-century thinker Donatus, who, following Aristotle, used the word to describe the convulsive, revelatory moment of a dramatic conclusion, what we today might describe as the *dénouement*.²⁵ In Handel's *Serse* (1738), this moment occurs during the opera's penultimate scene, when the Persian king, Xerxes, learns that Romilda, the woman he loves, has secretly married his brother, Arsamene; as Xerxes reels from the news, he is dealt another blow by an incriminating letter he receives from the princess Amastre, whom Xerxes had abandoned well before the opera had even begun. At this world-shattering moment of discovery and defeat, all of the opera's plot lines seem to converge, and Xerxes gives vent to his rage in an aria that invokes, quite literally, a catastrophe:

²⁴ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London: W. Strahan, 1755-56).

²⁵ Donatus, “De Comoedia et tragoedia” trans. C. J. McDonough in Michael J. Sidnell, *Sources of Dramatic Theory*, vol. 1: Plato to Congreve (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 78-81. By mid-century, “catastrophe” and “*dénouement*” (usually translated as “unravelling”) had acquired the same meaning in English. See William Cook, *The Elements of Dramatic Criticism. Containing the Analysis of the Stage* (London, 1775), 7.

<i>Xerxes</i>	Crude furie degli orridi abissi, aspergetemi d'atro veleno! Crolli il mondo, e 'l sole s'eclissi a quest'ira, che spira nel seno.	Cruel furies of the horrid abysses, shower me with black venom. Let the world collapse, and the sun be eclipsed by the wrath that fills my breast.
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Because of its associations with the often violent, unhappy reversals of classical tragedy, the word “catastrophe” had by Handel’s time begun to acquire the modern negative connotation of “disaster,” making the term as applicable to Xerxes’s apocalyptic vision as it is to the opera’s climactic end.²⁶ Handel’s musical setting is appropriately fiery (Ex. 1.1).

²⁶ Both uses were common throughout the eighteenth century. See “Catastrophe,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Example 1.1) *Serse*, Act III, Scene 11, Aria. “Crude furie” (Serse)

51. Aria
Allegro

f

3

6 SERSE

Ser. Cru - de
Wil - de

9

Ser. fu - rie de - gli or - ri - di a - bis - si, a - sper - ge - te - mi, a - sper -
Fu - rien der grau - sigs - ten Grün - de, macht mich see - len - los, macht mich

p

12

Ser. 

- ge - te - mi, a - sper - ge - te - mi, d'a - tro ve -
see - len - los, macht mich see - len - los, füllt mich mit

14

Ser.

- le - - - - -
Gal - - - - -

The musical score for 'Ser.' and 'Gal.' is presented on two systems. The first system features a vocal line for 'Ser.' on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The lyrics '- le - - - - -' are written below the staff. Below this, the lyrics 'Gal - - - - -' are written. The second system continues the vocal line for 'Ser.' and includes a piano accompaniment for 'Gal.' on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The piano part consists of a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The key signature remains one sharp (F#).

16

Ser.

16

Ser.

19

Ser.

- no! A - sper - ge - te-mi, cru - de fu - ri-e, cru - de
- le! Macht mich see - len-los, wil - de Fu - ri-en, wil - de

22

Ser. 

25

Ser. 

28

Ser. 

After a brisk, forceful opening motto, the ritornello erupts with wild scalar descents in the violins, each mounting successively by step, while agitated string tremolos churn in the background. Equally thrilling is the aria's vocal line, written for the virtuoso castrato Gaetano Majorano, called Caffarelli, in which large leaps, sustained high notes, and rapid-fire coloratura all conspire to make "Crude furie" Xerxes's most impressive showpiece, if not the high point of the opera. With the end of the world at hand, Xerxes seems hell-bent on bringing the house down with him.

Plot complications are resolved quickly after this, when Amastre arrives to confront her betrayer: she seizes Xerxes's sword and threatens him with it before turning it upon herself in despair. Filled with remorse, the king repents and asks forgiveness, much to the amazement of all onstage. "I am breathless and stunned," gasps Arsamene, while his servant Elviro whispers, "I am trembling all over."²⁷ The opera ends as any tragedy might, with general astonishment, brought about by the audience's shared experience of terror and pity, followed by a clear moral message for everyone to carry home. These were, according to classical doctrine, the primary means by which tragedy achieved its emotive effects, an idea that was repeated in countless dramatic treatises of the time.²⁸

²⁷ "Io respiro e stupisco" / "Sono tutto tremante."

²⁸ The tenet that terror and pity were necessary components of tragic drama originated in Aristotle's *Poetics*. See Malcolm Heath, *The Poetics of Tragedy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 11-17. For two eighteenth-century views, compare Charles Batteaux, *A Course of the Belles Lettres: or the Principles of Literature*, trans. Miller, vol. 2 (London, 1761), 35: "When pity or terror are to be raised, the unravelling or catastrophe should certainly be unfortunate"; and *The Works of M. de Voltaire... with*

One of the most astonishing features of *Serse*'s conclusion, however, lies neither in its music nor in the details of its plot but in the remarkable consensus of critical opinion concerning its tone. For despite Xerxes's raging strings and vocal pyrotechnics, not to mention the aria's strict *da capo* form—all telltale signs of serious operatic expression—"Crude furie" has repeatedly been viewed as nothing more than a colossal joke. Hugo Meynell has described the aria's overall effect as "very satirical" due to the fact that Xerxes "has deliberately been made a fool of"; John Merrill Knapp deems it "close to a parody of the typical opera seria rage aria"; and Winton Dean calls it "a brilliant send-up of all operatic invocations to the Furies," adding that "there is no mistaking the note of parody" in the aria's G major tonality, bombastic musical gestures, and inflated poetic language.²⁹ Although not everyone has agreed on this point—Charles Burney thought the aria "curious, spirited, and original," and Harold Powers called it "grand"³⁰—it is easy to understand why modern commentators have had trouble taking *Serse*'s conclusion at face value. Xerxes is, after all, a tyrant whose callous actions have finally come back to haunt him.

Nonetheless, the uncertainty surrounding this aria is unusual, and seems to challenge much of what we know about genre, musical representation, and didactic

Notes, Historical, Critical, and Explanatory, trans. T. Francklin, T. Smollett, et al., vol. 35 (London, 1761-81), 179: "without terror and pity, tragedy has no existence."

²⁹ Hugo Meynell, *The Art of Handel's Operas* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986), 226-7; John Merrill Knapp, *Handel's Later Operas (1726-41): A Working Manuscript* (American Handel Society, 1992), ch. 20, p. 35; Winton Dean, *Handel's Operas, 1726-1741* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2006), 429.

³⁰ Charles Burney, *A General History of Music, from the Earliest Ages to the Present Period*, vol. 4 (London, 1776-89), 425; Harold Powers, "Il Serse trasformato II," *Musical Quarterly* 48 (1962): 90.

function in eighteenth-century opera seria. Why would Handel have written a virtuosic showpiece, to be performed by one of the most famous singers in Europe, only to turn both aria and singer into objects of ridicule? And if he did, what might this decision tell us about Handel's relationship to the Italian *dramma per musica*, an art form whose "seriousness" was ostensibly predicated on the noble sentiments of gracious, benevolent monarchs, not the spiteful invective of a spoiled dictator? One possible answer to these questions lies in *Serse*'s textual sources. The libretto, by Silvio Stampiglia, dates from 1694, when it was set to music by Giovanni Bononcini, though the opera's origins lie in a much earlier Venetian source, Nicolò Minati and Francesco Cavalli's *Il Xerse*, from 1654.³¹ Apart from a number of cuts, Handel's text closely follows Stampiglia's version, effectively making *Serse* the oldest libretto that Handel ever set, a fact that would have profound consequences for the opera's overall form and tone.

Serse's seventeenth-century origins are most evident in its subject matter. Since Handel's own time critics have noted the unmistakable elements of comedy in the story: the sleepy servant Elviro, who sells flowers in disguise and sings in a broken dialect; Atalanta, the manipulative sister who openly flaunts her ability to charm men; and of course Xerxes himself, the lecherous buffoon whose lust for the young Romilda is matched only by the affection he famously lavishes upon a tree. Burney expressed his distaste for these comic episodes when he called Stampiglia's libretto "one of the worst

³¹ The classical source for the story is Herodotus's *History*, Books VII and IX. For a concise summary of the libretto sources, see Terence Best, *Serse*, *HWV 40*, Hallische Händel-Ausgabe, Serie II, Band 39, (Bärenreiter, Kassel, 2003), x-xi. Also see Reinhard Strohm, "Handel and his Italian Opera Texts," in *Essays on Handel and Italian Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

that Handel ever set to Music, for besides feeble writing, there is mixture of tragi-comedy and buffoonery in it, which Apostolo Zeno and Metastasio had banished from the serious opera.”³² Indeed, comic scenes and characters had been regular features of operas written before the Arcadian reforms of the 1690s and early 1700s, a fact that has led many commentators to deem *Serse* the most backward-looking of Handel’s operas.³³ This might explain Xerxes’s anomalous final aria and does much to account for the discrepancies between dramatic context, musical content, and affective register in the opera as a whole.

Handel’s decision to reuse much of Bononcini’s music in his own setting would contribute to the opera’s old-fashioned feel, a subject that has received a great deal of scholarly attention in our own time.³⁴ Among the many stylistic anachronisms that found their way into Handel’s score, the opera’s formal irregularities stand out most of all: twenty-one of *Serse*’s forty-eight arias and duets are abridged, some by omitting the customary B section and da capo, while others are practically reduced to fragments,

³² Burney, *General History*, vol. 4, 424.

³³ For a discussion of comic elements in Venetian opera, see Ellen Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991): 189-190; 323-329. A detailed history and summary of the Arcadian reforms, particularly those of Apostolo Zeno, can be found in Robert Freeman, *Opera Without Drama: Currents of Change in Italian Opera, 1675-1725* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981). Virtually every Handel scholar since Dent has noted *Serse*’s comic anachronisms. See Edward J. Dent, “The Operas,” in *Handel: A Symposium*, ed. Gerald Abraham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 56.

³⁴ Handel’s borrowing practices in *Serse* are the focus of three important studies of the opera: Harold Powers, “Il Serse trasformato I-II,” *Musical Quarterly* 47, 48 (1961, 1962): 481-92, 73-92; Winton Dean, “Handel’s *Serse*” in *Opera and the Enlightenment*, ed. Thomas Bauman and Marita P. McClymonds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Lowell Lindgren, “To Be a Bee in 18th-Century England, as Exemplified by Handel’s *Xerxes*,” *Göttinger Händel-Beiträge* 7 (1998): 57-72.

recalling a time when distinctions between aria, arioso, and recitative were much more fluid than they would be in the eighteenth century. The result is often a stream of short, simple ariettas, whose repetitive, periodic tunes once led musicologists of a previous generation to conclude (mistakenly) that *Serse* anticipated the more naturalistic formal features of Mozartean opera buffa.³⁵

Yet while it may be true that *Serse*'s comic content and unusual forms stand as archaic remnants of seventeenth-century operatic practice, this does not account for the fact that Handel chose to set Stampiglia's libretto during a period of British theatrical history when comedy ruled the stage, and when opera often found itself the butt of the joke. Between 1711 and 1747, as many as seventy percent of all stage productions mounted in London were comedies or farcical afterpieces,³⁶ two of which—John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) and Henry Carey's *The Dragon of Wantley* (1737)—were not only the most popular stage works of their time, but were also cherished for their irreverent treatment of Italian opera. Following the great success of *The Beggar's Opera*, a flood of similar works were produced in London over the next decade, whose ludicrous characters satirized politics, religion, and the fashions of the day, among which opera stood as a principal target. Like *The Beggar's Opera* before them, these satirical

³⁵ The idea that *Serse* anticipated future operatic trends, or that it was modeled on the early Neapolitan intermezzi taking hold in Italy at that time has been refuted by Powers, "Il Serse trasformato," and nearly every scholar who has followed him.

³⁶ For a table of performances, see Frances M. Kavenik, *British Drama, 1660-1779: A Critical History* (New York: Twayne, 1995), 118-122. An exhaustive (though dated) list can be found in Avery, Scouten et al, *The London Stage, 1660-1800*, Parts 2 and 3 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1960-61).

afterpieces were interspersed with popular English ballads, whose short, simple tunes, many of seventeenth-century origin, more than faintly resemble *Serse*'s old-world ariettas.³⁷

Indeed, *Serse* is closer in form and content to these comic afterpieces than any of Handel's other stage works—so close, in fact, that after attending one performance, the Fourth Earl of Shaftesbury remarked, “My own judgment is that it is a capital opera notwithstanding ‘tis called a ballad one.”³⁸ Shaftesbury's comment is revealing, for it not only opens a rare window into mid-eighteenth-century opera reception—the implication being that many audience members considered *Serse* a ballad opera—but it also demonstrates that Italian opera and burlesque theater were not thought mutually exclusive by London audiences, and indeed, could be seen to have much in common. In this chapter I will investigate this relationship by situating *Serse* within its wider theatrical context, considering the ways in which opera might have intersected with other forms of popular English theater during the decade following the premiere of *The Beggar's Opera*. By examining *Serse* in light of contemporary British views of opera and theater, as well as Handel's own responses to his theatrical competitors, I will show how English theater not only influenced the reception of Italian opera in London, but also had a demonstrable impact on Handel's own approach to musical composition.

³⁷ The stylistic similarities between *Serse*'s abridged aria forms and contemporary English ballads are discussed in Lowell Lindgren, “To Be a Bee,” 69-72.

³⁸ Letter of May 4, 1738 to James Harris, printed in *Music and Theatre in Handel's World: The Family Papers of James Harris*, ed. Donald Burrows and Rosemary Dunhill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 49.

ABSURDITY, NOISE, AND NONSENSE: LOWBROW OPERA

Before I turn to *Serse* and the London theater of the 1730s, it will be useful to look at a play that predated them and, in some way, predicted the shape they were both to take. Henry Fielding's *The Author's Farce* (1730) is a ballad opera about a young playwright, Luckless, whose new tragedy has been rejected by every theatre in town. Embittered, Luckless decides to take revenge on London's publishers and impresarios by mounting his own puppet-show farce called "The Pleasures of the Town." Presented as the last act of Fielding's play, Luckless's farcical "afterpiece" takes place in Hades, where life-sized personifications of London's theater world compete for the favor of the ruling Goddess of Nonsense. Fittingly, each of Luckless's characters communicates in a manner appropriate to the dramatic genre he or she represents: Don Tragedio shouts in heroic couplets, Monsieur Pantomime gestures silently, and Signor Opera, the goddess's chosen favorite, is given much opportunity to sing. Signor Opera, however, little resembles the heroic personages found in Italian opera seria; after first declaring his distaste for wisdom, virtue, and martial glory, the *primo uomo* concludes his second aria with a passionate tribute to wealth:

Sr. Opera In Riches is center'd all Humane Delight
 No Joy is on Earth, but what Gold can obtain.
 If Women, Wine,
 Or Grandeur fine,
 Be most your Delight, all these Riches can;
 Would you have Men to flatter?
 To be Rich is the Matter;
 When you cry he is Rich, you cry a Great Man.³⁹

Fielding's assault on the greed of Italian singers is hardly surprising, considering the enormous salaries and extravagant gifts bestowed on opera stars by their British patrons, a practice that was frequently condemned in the London press.⁴⁰ However, though some commentators have seen this passage as a clear jab at prime minister Robert Walpole—chiefly in its reference to a “Great Man”⁴¹—the final lines unmistakably make an ironic nod to the eighteenth-century pantomime and theater manager, John Rich.

Popularly known as the harlequin “Lun,” Rich achieved some notoriety in 1728 when he produced Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* during its first spectacular run. The

³⁹ Henry Fielding, *The Author's Farce and The Pleasures of the Town*, First edition (London, 1730).

⁴⁰ Faustina Bordoni's March 1727 benefit concert, for example, was reported to earn her £1800 in addition to her salary of £1500. These complaints escalated in the mid-30s with the arrival of Farinelli in 1734: *The Prompter*, March 14, 1735, bitterly estimated Farinelli's salary to be upwards of £2000, not including his benefit concert of that same year.

⁴¹ “Great Man” was a common epithet for Walpole at this time, though it is possible that the passage could allude to both men. For a political reading of this passage, see Sheridan Baker, “Political Allusion in Fielding's *Author's Farce*, *Mock Doctor*, and *Tumble-Down Dick*,” *PMLA* 77 (1962): 221-231.

reference seems likely here, not only because the word “Rich” is capitalized every time it appears, even as an adjective, but also because this is, after all, a theater piece about the theater, and what better representative of worldly wealth gained via the pleasures of the town could be found than Rich himself, whose fortunes earned from *The Beggar’s Opera* and from his extremely popular pantomimes at Lincoln’s Inn Fields were by 1730 already legendary?⁴²

Despite their purported love of money (or indeed because of it), John Rich and Italian opera would seem to share little else in common given opera’s reputation for bankrupting its patrons. Since its earliest appearance in London, opera had been a hazardous business venture at best, a fact witnessed first-hand by both Rich and his father, Christopher, when the first Haymarket opera company’s onetime manager, Owen Swiney, fled to the Continent in 1713 to escape his debts, the opera itself closing down not long thereafter.⁴³ London theatergoers would again be reminded of the financial perils of opera management in the following decade, when the Royal Academy of Music, under Handel’s musical direction, collapsed in 1728 after burning through some 25,000 pounds in royal subsidies and subscriptions in less than ten years.⁴⁴ Years of waning opera attendance, exacerbated by the success of *The Beggar’s Opera* and the previous season’s

⁴² Rich achieved his first major success in pantomime in 1724 with *The Necromancer, or Harlequin Doctor Faustus*, which was still popular well into the 1730s. The famous quip, much repeated by theater historians, is that *The Beggar’s Opera* “Made Gay rich, and Rich gay.”

⁴³ Between 1708 and 1714, the opera company had switched hands six times. See Robert D. Hume, “The Sponsorship of Opera in London, 1704-1720,” *Modern Philology* 85:4 (1988): 429.

⁴⁴ For a brief summary of opera finances during this time, see Hume, “Opera Management in London in the 1730s,” *Music & Letters* 67 (1986): 349-50.

scandal between rival sopranos Faustina Bordoni and Francesca Cuzzoni, had forced the Royal Academy to dissolve by March 1728, and Italian opera would not be seen again in London for nearly two years.⁴⁵

It is all the more remarkable, then, that just six years later, Fielding's improbable comparison would prove a reality when Rich agreed to produce Handel's operas in his newly built theater at Covent Garden (a theater, it should be noted, that was partially financed by proceeds from *The Beggar's Opera*). Between 1734 and 1737 seven new Handel operas premiered at Covent Garden, and nine more were revived. As Robert D. Hume has pointed out, Rich's motives for taking such an extravagant financial gamble are frustratingly unclear. Not only did Handel's performances cut deeply into Rich's profits—doubly so because Rich continued to pay his actors for the nights they were unable to work—but such losses might have been avoided had Rich simply allowed Handel to use his currently unoccupied theatre at Lincoln's Inn Fields.⁴⁶ Predictably, the collaboration proved financially disastrous to Rich, who by 1737 was unable to pay the ground rent on any of his theaters because of "severe Losses by the Opera's etc. carry'd out by Mr Handel and my Self at Covent Garden these three years past."⁴⁷ He

⁴⁵ The final opera performance under the Royal Academy, Handel's *Siroe*, took place on March 28, 1728. There would be no opera in London until Handel's *Lotario* premiered on December 2, 1729 under new management. For a comprehensive account of the founding of the Royal Academy and its collapse, see Elizabeth Gibson, *The Royal Academy of Music, 1719-1728: Its Institution and Its Directors* (New York: Garland, 1989).

⁴⁶ Hume, "Handel and Opera Management in London in the 1730s." *Music & Letters* 67 (1986): 347-62.

⁴⁷ Letter from Rich to his landlord, the Duke of Bedford, dated March 9, 1737. Greater London Record Office, E/BER/CG/E8/10/1, reprinted in "John Rich," *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses,*

terminated the partnership that year, and Handel would move back to the Haymarket Theater for his final three seasons as an opera composer.

Although it cannot explain why the impresario would have risked his fortune for Handel, an oft-quoted remark in Rich's dedication of *The Rape of Proserpine* (1727) provides some insight into his possible reasons for venturing into opera. Confessing that he shared the "very common Opinion" that Italian opera was unsustainable on the English stage, he writes:

Though my Inclination to Musick frequently leads me to visit the Italian Opera, yet... not to mention the trite Objection of the Performances being in Italian, and the general ill Choice of the Subjects for those Compositions; it is evident that the vast Expence of procuring Foreign Voices, does necessarily exclude those various Embellishments of Machinery, Painting, Dances, as well as Poetry it self, which have been always esteemed (except till very lately in *England*) Auxiliaries absolutely necessary to the Success of Musick.⁴⁸

Surprisingly, Rich's reason for disliking opera has little to do with the common complaint that it was in a foreign language, or even that it was an expensive affair: after all, Rich's lavishly decorated harlequinades were not only costly themselves, but stemmed from a theatrical tradition that had its roots in Italy. His position, rather, is that opera's focus on highly-paid singers prevented it from including the other entertainments with which it

Musicians, Dancers, Managers, and Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800, ed. Highfill, Burnim, Langhans (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973).

⁴⁸ Rich, dedication to Lewis Theobald, *The Rape of Proserpine* (London, 1727), quoted in Hume, "Opera Management," 354.

undoubtedly belonged, and which Rich was known for producing: pantomime, dance, and visual spectacle. Later in the same dedication, Rich proposes to introduce such auxiliary arts to his own part-serious, part-comic pantomimes, declaring that by so doing he will give London audiences a glimpse of “the Effect an Opera wou’d have, if conducted (by an abler Hand) in the same Manner.” The passage makes it clear that, far from dismissing opera completely, Rich seems to envision a new kind of opera, in which machines and dances take the place of bad poetry and overpaid singers: in short, opera elevated to the condition of pantomime.⁴⁹ This opinion was echoed by a February 18 press review of Rich’s *The Rape of Proserpine* that same year, in which the anonymous author wrote that the production was “of the Nature of Pantomimes, partly grotesque, and partly vocal, but far exceeds all ever yet shewn, in the Magnificence and Beauty of the Scenes, the Number and Richness of the Habits, as well as the Fable, which is purely poetical, as the Italian Operas ought to be.”⁵⁰

Perhaps this new kind of entertainment is what Rich had in mind when he entered into a partnership with Handel. It would at the very least explain why Handel’s Covent Garden operas so little resemble those of his Royal Academy years. Unlike the stark tone and lofty heroics of earlier works like *Rodelinda* and *Giulio Cesare* (both 1724), Handel’s operas under Rich are notable for their spectacular, often magical effects, dances,

⁴⁹ Sarah McCleave has also seen this preface as proof of Rich’s desire to produce operas along the lines of his own pantomimes. See “Dancing at the English Opera: Marie Sallé’s Letter to the Duchess of Richmond,” in *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 17 (1999): 27.

⁵⁰ *Mist’s Weekly Journal*, February 18, 1727.

and transformation scenes.⁵¹ *Alcina* (1734), for example, features a powerful sorceress who summons demons and transforms men into beasts. *Giustino* (1737) contains a shipwreck, two apparition scenes, a wild bear attack, and a battle with a sea monster. And, quite unusually for Italian opera, all of Handel's early Covent Garden operas include extended ballets, composed for the renowned French dancer, Marie Sallé, who had spent her early London career dancing not in opera but in Rich's lavish pantomimes at Lincoln's Inn Fields.⁵²

It may be no coincidence that the atypical features of Handel's Covent Garden operas are nearly identical to the spectacular effects that had made Rich's pantomimes famous in previous years, effects that were often decried for pandering to common tastes. A published libretto and detailed stage description of Rich's *The Necromancer, or, Harlequin Doctor Faustus* (1723), for example, contains the following account of Harlequin's death:

The Scene is converted to a Wood; and a monstrous Dragon appears, after which several Figures arise, and join in a grand Antick Dance. As they are performing, a Clock strikes, the Doctor is seiz'd, hurried away by Spirits, and devour'd by the

⁵¹ Though predominant in these years, elements of dance and fantasy also figured largely in Handel's early London operas, *Rinaldo* (1711), *Teseo* (1713), and *Amadigi* (1715). Brief dances also appear in two Royal Academy operas, *Radamisto* (1720) and *Admeto* (1727).

⁵² Sallé had received her early training in the streets of Paris where her father worked as a fairground entertainer; she danced in nearly all of Handel's operas during the 1734-35 season, including *Alcina*, *Ariodante* (1735), the pasticcio *Oreste* (1734), and Handel's 1734 revisions of *Arianna in Creta* and *Il pastor fido*, before returning to France to dance for the Paris opera the following year. See Sarah McCleave, "Marie Sallé," *Grove Music Online* <www.grovemusic.com>, ed. Laura Macy (accessed March 4, 2012).

*Monster, which Immediately takes Flight; and while it is disappearing, Spirits
vanish, and other Dæmons rejoyce.*⁵³

Virtually everything in this episode can be found in Handel's Covent Garden operas, from the horrible monster down to the demonic ballet, for example, this stage direction from Act II of *Alcina*:

<i>Partita Alcina con impeto gittando via</i>	<i>Exit Alcina, violently throwing aside</i>
<i>la verga magica, ed allora manifestandosi</i>	<i>her magic wand; there then appear</i>
<i>diversi spiriti, e fantasmi, questi formano</i>	<i>various spirits and phantoms, who</i>
<i>il ballo.</i>	<i>dance a ballet.</i> ⁵⁴

Whether Rich had a hand in selecting the libretto texts Handel would set or whether Handel was simply choosing subject matter that could exploit Covent Garden's diverse resources, it is clear that during their partnership both men felt that opera could learn a lot from pantomime, particularly where attracting larger crowds was concerned.

⁵³ John Rich, *A Dramatick Entertainment, call'd The Necromancer: or, Harlequin Doctor Faustus* (London, 1724).

⁵⁴ Cf. Alcina's stage direction following her Act II incantation scene:

<i>Partita Alcina con impeto gittando via la</i>	<i>Exit Alcina, violently throwing aside her</i>
<i>verga magica, ed allora manifestandosi diversi</i>	<i>magic wand; there then appear various</i>
<i>spiriti, e fantasmi, questi formano il ballo.</i>	<i>spirits and phantoms, who dance a ballet.</i>

and the description of the sea monster in *Giustino*, Act II, Scene 3:

<i>Si vede da lontano a poco a poco</i>	<i>In the distance can be seen, slowly</i>
<i>sorgere dal mare spaventoso mostro,</i>	<i>rising in the sea, a dreadful monster</i>
<i>che nuotando riavvicina allo scoglio.</i>	<i>who swims closer to the rock.</i>

DUMB OPERAS AND SUNG ONES

The idea that pantomime could serve as a model for opera seems to contradict any notions we might have about the aristocratic pretensions of eighteenth-century opera audiences. Rich is not alone, however, in linking the two: rather, his vision of opera is part of a wider belief, held by many London theatergoers, that opera was a fundamentally different kind of theater than spoken drama, one that had much in common with the afterpieces and entr'actes mounted by Rich and others like him during these years.

The opinion that opera was nothing more than an absurd and senseless spectacle was not new during this time, nor was it confined to Britain. Since the earliest days of opera criticism, operatic conventions had seemed ridiculous to spectators whose aesthetic worldview rested upon Aristotelian ideals of reason, decorum, and verisimilitude. But opera was not the only dramatic art that resisted this aesthetic. Where the seductive sounds of opera were said to appeal only to the ear, pantomime and dance, by eschewing all forms of linguistic expression altogether, were analogously viewed as pure spectacle, as mere narcotics for the unthinking, uncritical eye.⁵⁵ Unlike poetry and “legitimate” spoken theater, moreover, opera and pantomime had pleasure alone as their only goal, and thus represented the worst of what many considered to be a “low,” degraded taste.

This explains why genres like opera and pantomime frequently found themselves the collective targets of satirical attacks like Fielding's in *The Author's Farce*, which

⁵⁵As one critic described pantomime, “here the whole Company were Argus's; all Eyes, and no other Sense to please.” *The Universal Journal*, March 4, 1724.

lampooned their contribution to the English stage, often in strikingly similar terms.

Undoubtedly the most influential of these was Alexander Pope's mock-epic, *The Dunciad* (1729), in which thinly-veiled caricatures of John Rich, Colley Cibber, and others at the Court of Dullness each vie for the title of "King of Dunces." In Pope's first two editions, the writer Lewis Theobald, who created pantomimes for Rich's company, eventually wins the coveted title by raising his entertainments "from Booths to Theatre to Court"—in other words, by feeding puppet shows to aristocratic audiences. This feat Theobald is able to achieve only with the help of "Opera," who "prepares the way, / The sure fore-runner of her gentle sway"⁵⁶—the implication being that it was opera's pernicious influence on public taste that enabled pantomime to take hold on the British stage. A nearly identical depiction can be found in Gabriel Odingsells's *Bay's Opera* (1730), which features opera personified in the figure of Cantato, a tyrant who first deposes the good king Tragedo, before contending with Pantomime and his daughter Farcia for the degraded throne of Wit.⁵⁷

The view that opera, pantomime, and related entertainments were corrupting the British stage is also prevalent in countless critical essays printed during these years. In April, 1725, for example, one particularly hostile reviewer calling himself "Momus" declared English theater "most lamentably sunk, not only below the Antient Greeks and

⁵⁶ Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad*, Book III, second edition (London, 1735), 47.

⁵⁷ *Bay's Opera* premiered on the same night as Fielding's *Author's Farce*, and the two have many similarities (c.f. Fielding's characters, Signior Opera, Don Tragedio, Monsieur Pantomime, and Sir Farcical Comick). See Robert Hume, *Henry Fielding and the London Theatre* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 63-70; and Peter Lewis, *Fielding's Burlesque Drama: Its Place in the Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1987), 93-109.

Romans; not only below the first Writers of our own Country, but even below the worst of those, who went immediately before us.”⁵⁸ He, of course, places the blame on the “monstrous Absurdities” and “execrable Trifles” recently introduced to the London stage: specifically, opera, masquerades, and “dumb shews” (pantomimes).⁵⁹ According to the review, whereas opera had first led the “Beau Monde... to give up the Instruction of their Understandings to the Edification of their Ears,” pantomime has now “turned Plagiaries upon Drolls and Puppet-Shews,” vulgar entertainments whose audiences “generally consist of the meanest of People.” Most distressing to the author, however, is the fact that both entertainments are enthusiastically “supported by all the Nobility and Gentry in the Kingdom.”

As opera and pantomime came to be considered manifestations of the same theatrical impulse—to please and impress the public—both became increasingly indistinguishable in the mouths of their critics; pantomimes, in fact, were often called “dumb operas” due to their musical component and their frequent incorporation of myth and fantasy.⁶⁰ In a December 1734 issue of Aaron Hill’s weekly paper, *The Prompter*, William Popple neatly lumped the two together in a single breath, calling pantomime “Absurdity, Noise, Nonsense, and Puppet-Show,” and accusing opera of being devoid of

⁵⁸ He refers to the frank and often sexually explicit Restoration “Comedy of Manners” pioneered by an older generation of playwrights like Congreve, Wycherley, Farquhar, and Etherege.

⁵⁹ *The London Journal*, April 3, 1725.

⁶⁰ E.g., in *The Dancing Devil, or, The Roaring Dragon: A Dumb Farce* (London, 1724): “As if our Stage Projectors meant/With his Dumb Op’ra they present...” During the infamous 1740 copyright dispute between John Rich and John Hill, in which Hill accused Rich of plagiarizing his English stage work, *Orpheus*, the piece is always referred to as an opera, though we would consider it a pantomime today.

“Plot, Meaning, or Connection” altogether. Popple concludes his essay by gravely declaring:

If Opera and Pantomime once get absolute possession, by too long an absence of Common Sense, it may then be too late. I shall do all that lies in my power to restore the rightful monarch to its theatric throne by waging eternal war against the powerful usurpers that now govern.⁶¹

Popple’s fanaticism serves as just one example of how such comparisons could be taken to extremes. Two months later, *The Grub Street Journal*, responding to John Rich’s fantastical scenes currently in vogue at Covent Garden, facetiously announced a new “play, or opera, or farce, or pantomime, (for it may be called any or all of these)” created by “Arlequin Chef d’oeuvre” that would contain Italian arias, English ballads, an Indian juggler, a tightrope walker, an extremely immodest Parisian dancer, a multi-headed man, an orange grove, a dog kennel, and which would “conclude with a pleasant prospect of Hell, according to the conclusion of almost all the modern entertainments.”⁶² Though exaggerated to absurd proportions, the author’s description leaves no doubt about Italian opera’s proper place in the theatrical arts: far from the noble sentiments of tragedy and heroic drama, opera here becomes no different from a raucous farce, or even a common puppet show, merely one of the motley delights offered daily to the adoring public.

⁶¹ *The Prompter*, December 24, 1734, reprinted in William W. Appleton and Kalman A. Burnim, *The Prompter: A Theatrical Paper* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1966).

⁶² The “Arlequin Chef d’oeuvre,” is, of course, Rich himself. *Grub Street Journal*, February 20, 1735.

OPERA, BURLESQUE, AND REPRESENTATION

By the 1730s, public ridicule of opera had acquired something of a distinguished pedigree in Britain, one that went back to the writings of John Dennis, Richard Steele, Joseph Addison, and the first issues of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*.⁶³ One need only glance at the sheer number of pamphlets and newspapers condemning opera during these years to understand that opera's "public" image in London was rarely, if ever, flattering. Even John Rich was too savvy a businessman to ignore public opinion altogether. Despite his short-lived support for opera, Rich often distanced himself from Italian opera by producing works that parodied its conventions. The most important of these was, of course, *The Beggar's Opera*, whose low characters, mock-operatic similes, and facile happy conclusion inspired a long line of similar satirical works that would adopt the word "opera" in their titles, if not devote themselves entirely to attacking opera.

A typical example from these years is *The Opera of Operas* (1733), Eliza Haywood and William Hatchett's ballad-opera adaptation of Henry Fielding's theatrical farce, *The Tragedy of Tragedies, or, the Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great* (1731). Fielding's original characters bear names like Dollalolla, Huncamunca, and Glumdalca—a playful jibe at the fanciful names of Greco-Roman heroes—and speak in a low comic language that exaggerates and distorts the convoluted dialogue and elaborate metaphors of serious spoken drama:

⁶³ For more on these early critiques of opera, see Henrik Knif, *Gentlemen and Spectators: Studies in Journals, Opera & the Social Scene in Late Stuart London* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 1995).

King Smile Dollalolla—ha! what wrinkled sorrow

Hangs, sits, lies, frowns upon thy knitted brow.

Whence flow those tears fast down thy blubber'd cheeks,

Like a swollen gutter, gushing thro' the streets?⁶⁴

Fielding's parody works just as well when applied to Italian opera, which was maligned for similar poetic extremes. In their ballad opera adaptation, with music provided by Handel's onetime bassoonist, John Frederick Lampe, Haywood and Hatchett heighten the satirical effect by incorporating operatic conventions into the mostly spoken play.⁶⁵ Thus, there are scenes in which Huncamunca cues her own music ("Give me some musick—see that it be sad"), Lord Grizzle explicitly requests a *da capo* ("sing that o'er again"), and stock operatic expressions proliferate to absurdity, as in Grizzle's Act I rage aria:

Grizzle I'll roar, I'll rant, I'll rave;

I'll ride on clouds, thro' seas I'll swim,

I'll for the nation dig a grave,

And bury it for my whim.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Fielding, *The Tragedy of Tragedies* (London, 1730).

⁶⁵ Lampe's music is now lost. The following season, Thomas Arne would compose the music, also lost, to a one-act afterpiece version of the same play for a competing production at Drury Lane. See Berta Joncus, "Handel at Drury Lane: Ballad Opera and the Production of Kitty Clive," *Journal of the Royal Musicological Association* 131 (2006): 200.

⁶⁶ Eliza Haywood and William Hatchett, *The Opera of Operas* (London, 1733). This aria was added by Haywood and Hatchett, but similar passages are scattered throughout Fielding's original farce and retained in the operatic adaptation, e.g., Noodle's account of Tom Thumb's death: "Oh! monstrous! dreadful!

Mocking the often brutally violent conclusions of English tragedies, Fielding's play ends with a massive bloodbath that leaves the entire cast of characters dead within a handful of lines. In Haywood and Hatchett's ballad opera, however, two spectators, Sir Crit-Operatical and Modely, come onstage immediately following this event to discuss Fielding's unsatisfactory ending:

Sir Crit. I would be glad to know who ever saw an Italian Opera end tragically? By gad, when we English imitate any thing that's foreign, we do it so awkwardly...

Mod. But good Sir Crit, keep your Temper 'till you see the Catastrophe.

Sir Crit. Catastrophe! Why, the Actors are all dead, and unless the Author can give them a new Being, he will never be able to give his Opera another Ending.

Mod. But I hear they are not really dead.

Sir Crit. How! not dead?

Mod. No Sir, they are only enchanted.⁶⁷

Following this, in a caricature of the obligatory and often arbitrary *lieto fine* invariably tacked onto the end of serious operas, the entire cast is miraculously resurrected, much to the admiration of Sir Crit-Operatical, who calls the transformation a "Wond'rous, astonishing Plot! more sudden than the Reprieve in *The Beggar's Opera*."

terrible! oh! oh!/Deaf be my ears, for ever blind my eyes!/Dumb be my tongue! feet lame! all senses lost!/Howl Wolves! grunt Bears! hiss Snakes!/Shriek all ye Ghosts!"

⁶⁷ Haywood and Hatchett, *The Opera of Operas*.

The entire episode, of course, is modeled on the final scene of Gay's farce, in which Macheath's execution is stayed by the sudden entrance of the Beggar and the Player:

Player Why then, friend, this is a downright deep tragedy. The
catastrophe is manifestly wrong; for an opera must end happily.

Beggar Your objection, sir, is very just; and is easily remov'd. For you
must allow that in this kind of drama, 'tis no matter how absurdly
things are brought about—So—you rabble there—run and cry, a
reprieve!—Let the prisoner be brought back to his wives in
triumph.⁶⁸

The improbable happy conclusions of Italian opera, hardly less forced or sudden than those of these comic burlesques, were generally seen to contradict the natural outcomes that their sober plots required. Haywood and Hatchett's opera, following Gay's example, thus ends with a predictable love duet and a perfunctory closing chorus in praise of happiness, poking fun at operatic conventions while underscoring Italian opera's fundamental incompatibility with serious spoken theater.

The Opera of Operas exemplifies the kind of operatic burlesque that appeared in London in the wake of *The Beggar's Opera*. Although it only achieved moderate success, it did receive some publicity when several members of the Royal Family were seen attending on several nights, including the Prince of Wales, three of the royal princesses,

⁶⁸ Gay, *The Beggar's Opera* (London, 1730).

and several other prominent noblemen and visiting diplomats in June of 1733.⁶⁹ The presence of royalty at a low farce was extremely uncommon at this time; indeed, the ribald humor and vehement social and political satire expressed in many ballad operas of the time—Fielding’s in particular—usually provoked consternation, if not outright censorship, from public officials.⁷⁰ The Royal Family’s sudden interest in Haywood and Hatchett’s burlesque demonstrates not only that mockery of Italian opera was apparently uncontroversial to the British nobility, but also that the most enthusiastic supporters of opera in London were perhaps the best disposed, and the most eager, to appreciate its absurdities.

Four years after *The Opera of Operas*, John Rich would expand his mock-operatic franchise by producing Henry Carey’s full-scale send-up of serious opera, *The Dragon of Wantley* (1737), which managed to break even Gay’s record when it received 69 performances in its first full season at Covent Garden.⁷¹ Replete with a singing dragon, a preposterously dressed anti-hero, two jealous women who scuffle onstage, and a

⁶⁹ Newspaper advertisements reported that the performances were given “By particular Desire of several Persons of Distinction.” Princess Amelia and the Duke of Cumberland were present on June 4, Frederick, Prince of Wales and the Earl of Egmont on the 6th, the Princess Mary and Princess Louise on the 8th, the Count of Montijo and the Spanish Ambassador on the 11th. See Scouten, ed. *The London Stage*, Part 3, 305-308.

⁷⁰ This had already been the case with Gay’s *Polly*, banned in 1729. Fielding would find himself at the center of controversy in 1736-1737 after his *Covent Garden Tragedy* and *The Historical Register for the Year 1736* provoked outrage for their lewdness and brazen criticism of the Walpole administration. The affair would end in the Licensing Act of 1737, which closed several theaters in London and required the Lord Chamberlain’s approval for all performances of theatrical works.

⁷¹ Carey and Lampe’s “Mock-Opera” had a brief run in May, 1737 at the Little Haymarket Theater, although it seems to have been written a few years earlier.

perfunctory choral finish, Carey's burlesque points to nearly every aspect of Italian opera that was ridiculed at the time, from the Faustina-Cuzzoni rivalry to the physiological deficiencies of Italian castrati, bluntly addressed in Margery's song about the English hero Moore, "He's a man every inch, I assure you."

Unlike the spoken dialogue and simple English ballads of *The Beggar's Opera* and its imitators, however, the music for *The Dragon of Wantley*, also composed by J. F. Lampe, apes the stylistic idiosyncrasies of Italian opera with suitably Italianate music.⁷² This includes secco recitative in place of spoken dialogue, a number of true da capo arias, a duet to conclude Act II, and a coloratura showpiece for the angry dragon, "Oh ho! Mr. Moore, / You Son of a Whore" (Fig. 1). Lampe's setting of this air is strikingly consistent with Baroque operatic style, in which wild vocal runs and churning string motives were the most easily identifiable musical markers of heightened rage. Only the dragon's bass voice, doubled strictly in unison, hints at a comic intent behind the music, although Carey's crude text easily gives the game away:

<i>Dragon</i>	Oh ho, Master Moore,
	You Son of a Whore,
	I wish I had known
	Your tricks before.

⁷² Lampe's lost music to *The Opera of Operas*, advertised on the frontispiece as being composed "after the Italian manner," presumably took a similar approach.

Figure 1) *The Dragon of Wantley*, Air. “Oh ho, Master Moore” (Dragon)⁷³



Moore fighting with y' Dragon.

Oh ho! Master Moore you son of a whore I wish I had known your tricks before, I wish I had known your tricks before; Oh ho! Master Moore you son of a whore, I wish I had known your tricks before, you son of a whore... I wish I had known your tricks before, before I... wish I had known your tricks before.

⁷³ Facsimile of George Bickam's *The Musical Entertainer* (London, 1740, reprinted by Boude Brothers: New York, 1965).

Perhaps not coincidentally, such parodic strategies call to mind another mock-aria, “Barbarous cruel man,” sung by none other than Signor Opera in Fielding’s *The Author’s Farce*. When his rival, Don Tragedio, threatens him with death, the Signior responds:

Sr. Opera Barbarous, cruel man,
I’ll sing thus while I’m dying, I’m dying like a Swan
I’m dying like a Swan, a Swan
A Swan,
With my Face all pale and wan.
More fierce art thou than Pyrates,
Than Pyrates,
Whom the Syrens Musick charms,
Alarms,
Disarms,
More fierce than Men on the high Roads,
On the high — — — — Roads,
On the high — — — — Roads.
More fierce than Men on the high Roads,
Whom Polly Peachum warms.
The Devil
Was made civil,
By Orpheus tuneful Charms;
And ca — — — — —
— — — — — n,
He gentler prove than Man?⁷⁴

⁷⁴ The music for this air does not survive.

Fielding not only mocks the general convention of singing in a dramatic work—with the ludicrous example, used by nearly all critics of opera from St. Evremond to Brecht, of a man singing while dying—but he also takes aim at particular musical features of Baroque operatic style. The Signor's disjointed syntax, excessive word repetitions, convoluted metaphors, and sections of mock-coloratura on the words “high” and “can” are all meant to represent a musical setting of the text, according to the operatic conventions of the time. Like Carey, Lampe, and other satirists of the time, then, Fielding merely adds vulgar sentiments and topical humor (note the reference to Polly Peachum in *The Beggar's Opera*) to stylistic features already typical of operatic singing, highlighting opera's fundamental incapacity to achieve verisimilitude and thus disqualifying it as a serious form of theater.

It is telling that all of these writers—Gay, Fielding, Carey, Haywood, Hatchett, and Lampe—used ludicrous texts and “low” situations to underscore the irrationality of opera's conventions without significantly altering the conventions themselves. Thus, the da capo, the lieto fine, the elaborate simile aria, florid coloratura, even the conceit of singing itself all appear in these burlesques in forms that closely resemble those of their Italian model, suggesting that opera was perceived as sufficiently ridiculous on its own terms, without the need for musical exaggeration. In this way, we might see Italian opera to have possessed a kind of comic *potential* in eighteenth-century London, one that, regardless of the gravity of its stories or the elevated status of its characters, was always available to, if not always registered by, its audiences. Considering the pervasiveness of

operatic burlesque during these years, moreover, not to mention the support given it by members of the nobility—the very people who were responsible for bringing Italian opera to Britain—it seems clear that this comic potential was perceived by opera’s most dedicated devotees. In fact, it could be said that only those audience members who regularly attended opera would be able to get the joke.

SELF-BURLESQUE AND SELF-PRESERVATION: *SERSE*

This was the theatrical world in which Handel’s *Serse* was born. Handel began work on the opera in December 1737, only five months after his failed collaboration with Rich had ended, and during the very season *The Dragon of Wantley* was enjoying its enormously successful run at Covent Garden.⁷⁵ Surprisingly, any resentment Handel might have felt about Rich’s success at opera’s expense seems to have dissipated by the time he himself went to see Carey’s farce. In a letter to the Earl of Strafford dated January 19, 1738, Lord Wentworth reported:

We was at Covent Garden Play House last night, my mother was so good as to treat us with it, and the Dragon of Wantcliff [*sic*] was the farce. I like it vastly and the musick is excessive pretty, and tho’ it is a burlesque on the operas yet Mr Handel owns he thinks the tunes very well composed. I conclude your Lordship will go to

⁷⁵ According to a note on the cover page of *Serse*’s autograph score, Handel began composition on December 26, 1737 and completed the opera on February 14, 1738. It received its first performance on April 15. See Dean, “Handel’s *Xerxes*,” 165.

it as soon as you come to town, for every body generally commends it and it has been acted 36 times already and they are always pretty full. The poor operas I doubt go on but badly, for tho' every body praises both Caffarielli [*sic*] and the opera yet it has never been full, and if it is not now at first it will be very empty towards the latter end of the winter.⁷⁶

Yet again, we find evidence that public interest in operatic farce during the 1730s was not restricted to the lower and middling classes, nor to those aristocrats who merely disliked Italian opera. Wentworth is clearly saddened by the recent decline in opera attendance even as he celebrates *The Dragon of Wantley*'s tremendous success.

More surprising, however, is the fact that Handel attended and even seems to have enjoyed Carey's farce. His positive assessment of Lampe's music is very generous considering Handel's own *Faramondo* (1738) was precisely the "poor opera" suffering from chronically thin audiences at the time.⁷⁷ Clearly Handel, like Wentworth and many London theatergoers, was able to reconcile his love for Italian opera with an appreciation for the English burlesques that lampooned it, despite the threat the latter represented to opera's lasting success in Britain.

Wentworth's letter was written during the same month that Handel was busy setting *Serse* to music, suggesting that Handel not only attended Carey and Lampe's farce while working on his opera, but that, faced with ever-thinning audiences, he may even

⁷⁶ Letter of William Lord Wentworth to Thomas Wentworth, First Earl of Strafford, January 19, 1738, printed in *The Wentworth Papers, 1705-1739* (London: Wyman and Sons, 1883), 539.

⁷⁷ *Faramondo* received its first performance on January 3, 1738 and ran for only seven nights. Dean, *Handel's Operas: 1726-1741*, 411.

have been inspired by its success. This would explain why Handel, seemingly of his own accord, chose to use a forty-year-old comic libretto as the basis for his opera: Edward J. Dent suggested as much over seventy years ago when he called *Serse* “a desperate attempt to keep up with the taste of the day.”⁷⁸ It is hard to argue with Dent’s conclusion; after all, *Serse*’s low characters and ludicrous situations certainly resemble the popular British theater of Handel’s time more than any other Italian opera staged in Britain before it.

Serse even seems to employ the same burlesque strategies that were used against Italian opera by its eighteenth-century critics, as evidenced by the very first lines of the Argument, printed in the 1738 London libretto:

The contexture of this Drama is so very easy, that it wou’d be troubling the reader to give him a long argument to explain it. Some imbecillities, and the temerity of Xerxes (such as his being deeply enamour’d with a plane tree, and the building a bridge over the Hellespont to unite Asia to Europe) are the basis of the story; the rest is fiction.⁷⁹

The irreverence with which Handel’s librettist treats *Serse*’s historical source is surprising. After all, the Italian *dramma per musica*, modern scholars often tell us, was

⁷⁸ Edward J. Dent, *Handel* (London: Duckworth, 1934), 40, also quoted in Paul Henry Lang, *George Frideric Handel* (New York: Norton, 1966), 299.

⁷⁹ Reprinted in Ellen T. Harris, ed. *The Librettos of Handel’s Operas*, vol. 12. (New York: Garland Press, 1989), 20. The adapter of the libretto is unknown, though *Serse*’s close resemblance to Stampiglia’s *Il Xerse* from 1695 has led some scholars to suspect that Handel himself arranged the libretto text. Terence Best has demonstrated that Handel was in personal possession of a copy of Bononcini’s score, from which the London text was largely derived. See *Serse*, ed. Best, Hallische Händel-Ausgabe, xi.

an art form whose seriousness was largely derived from the authority bestowed upon it by its noble characters and historical subject matter. By dismissing the opera's classical origins as "imbecilities"—as opposed to the fictional revenge plots, complex love intrigues, and comic servants added by its seventeenth-century librettist—the author aligns himself with those critics of Italian opera, John Rich included, who considered all opera plots to be absurd, if not offensive, distortions of classical history.⁸⁰ His comment about the simplicity of the plot, moreover, can only have been intended as the deepest sarcasm: with competing love triangles between four siblings and two dynastic families, a vengeful princess dressed in men's clothing, a comic servant also in disguise, at least two cases of mistaken identity involving letters, and the countless misunderstandings that result from such intrigues, *Serse*'s story is anything but straightforward. Even the Earl of Shaftesbury, Handel's great admirer and friend, expressed his frustration with the opera when he called it "difficult to understand."⁸¹ Such a glib treatment of *Serse*'s convoluted story only underscores the opacity of the plot, again resonating with critics' accusations that Italian opera plots were impossible to follow.

Astonishingly, Handel seems to share his librettist's irreverent attitude in his own musical setting, adopting many of the satirical devices that were evident in the works of his detractors. An example can be found in "Ah! tigre infedele," the servant Elviro's

⁸⁰ Rich and many of his contemporaries believed that opera and all musical theater should not take realistic subjects for their plots, but should instead be "purely poetical." See Rich's comments about opera and "the general ill Choice of the Subjects for those Compositions," cited in note 25, and the review of *The Rape of Proserpine* in note 27.

⁸¹ Letter of May 4, 1738 to James Harris, in Burrows and Dunhill, eds., *Music and Theatre*, 49.

spontaneous sixteen-bar arietta in Act II, Scene 2. Upon hearing that the princess Romilda has been unfaithful to his master, Elviro suddenly shouts, in typical operatic bombast, “Ah! faithless tigress, / cruel snake,” and erupts with a mock-display of virtuosic singing worthy of Signor Opera himself (Ex. 1.2).

Example 1.2) *Serse*, Act II, Scene 2, Arietta, “Ah! tigre infedele” (Elviro)

Allegro

ELVIRO

Ah! ti - gre in - fe - de - le, ce - ra - sta cru - de - le, ce -
 Ah! Treibt sie's schon lan - ge, die scham - lo - se Schlan - ge, die

6

Elv.

- ra -
 scham -

11

Elv.

- sta cru - de - le!
 - - lo - se Schlan - ge, Ce - ra - sta cru - de - le!
 die scham - lo - se Schlan - ge?

All the hallmarks of operatic parody are here—Elviro’s hyperbolic reaction and clichéd poetic language, his long-winded coloratura and low vocal register, his strict doubling of the bass, and the aria’s extreme brevity, not to mention its abrupt conclusion on a dominant chord—making Handel’s musical setting almost indistinguishable from the attacks of his competitors.

As a point of comparison, Bononcini’s 1695 setting of this aria from *Il Xerse*, the source libretto for Handel’s opera, is comparably bombastic, but lacks the rambling coloratura of Handel’s version as well as the perfunctory handling of the harmonic sequence, which in *Serse* falls mechanically through the entire circle of fifths (Ex. 1.2, bars 4-13). Handel also shortened the aria’s length dramatically compared with Bononcini’s version, reducing Stampiglia’s original text by half.⁸² Thus revised, Handel’s musical setting places Elviro among an instantly recognizable type of British operatic caricature, to which Signor Opera and the Dragon of Wantley both belong.

On one level, this characterization is to be expected, for Elviro is explicitly a comic role: he is of low birth and he is described in the *dramatis personae* as “A Facetious Fellow.” Moreover, the Italian bass who created the role, Antonio Lottini, had already been known in London for his comic performances in the Italian intermezzi staged by Porpora’s Opera of the Nobility through the late 1730s.⁸³ Accordingly, Elviro’s arias

⁸² See Bononcini’s MS score, reprinted in John Roberts, ed., *Handel Sources: Materials for the Study of Handel’s Borrowing*, vol. 8 (New York: Garland, 1986), 135-6.

⁸³ Lottini, along with his comic partner, Anna Maria Faini, are often credited with bringing the first comic intermezzi to London in 1736. Franco Piperno, “Antonio Lottini,” *Grove Music Online* <www.grovemusic.com>, ed. Laura Macy (accessed May 4, 2012).

tend to be extremely short, technically simple, and most of his scenes occupy the same low register (both in subject matter and vocal production) typical to most eighteenth-century comic genres: he gets easily confused, he nearly falls asleep onstage, he proudly declares his love of wine, he is frightened of thunder, he sings real street songs in a Venetian dialect.⁸⁴ Indeed, to find such a ridiculous person in eighteenth-century *opera seria* is in itself striking. As Ellen T. Harris has pointed out, the only other comparable character from Handel's operas is Tabarco from *Almira* (1704), an atypical mixed-language work written during Handel's very early years in Hamburg.⁸⁵

In Handel's setting of "Ah! tigre infedele," however, the implied object of ridicule is not just the simple, foolish Elviro, as it is throughout much of the opera, but also the excessive, high-minded sentiments of opera itself. By having Elviro adopt overblown operatic gestures and virtuosic vocal techniques completely foreign to his character, Handel places those features of serious opera into stark relief, thereby rendering them ridiculous. Much like Carey, Lampe, Fielding, and Gay before him, Handel situates stock operatic expressions within a "low" comic context in order to underscore their absurdity. This is one important way in which Handel's opera resembles its farcical forbears in London, and does much to explain Shaftesbury's comment that *Serse* was "a capital opera notwithstanding 'tis called a ballad one."⁸⁶

⁸⁴ According to a note in the Fitzwilliam manuscript, his Act II flower song was inspired by a real street cry Handel heard while "near a brandy shop St. Giles's in Tyburn Road."

⁸⁵ Harris, ed. *The Librettos of Handel's Operas*, vol. 8, xvii.

⁸⁶ See note 15.

The role of Atalanta, Romilda's flirtatious, scheming sister, is of a similar comic mold. First performed by the Italian mezzo-soprano Margherita Chimenti, called "La Droghierina" (literally, "the little grocery girl"), Atalanta is the opera's self-avowed coquette, whose particular take on romance lies far from the modest reserve of most operatic lovers. As she announces in her E major aria at the end of Act I:

<i>Atalanta</i>	Un cenno leggiadretto,	A light little gesture,
	un riso vezzosetto,	a charming little smile,
	un moto di pupille	a motion of the eye
	può fare innamorar.	can incite a heart to love.
	Lusinghe, pianti, e frodi	Deception, tears, and guile
	son anche certi modi,	are also sure ways
	che destano faville	to arouse the spark,
	e tutti io li so far.	and all of these I can do well.

When not indulging in gratuitous self-flattery, Atalanta spends most of the opera trying to win the affections of Arsamene, Romilda's betrothed. After she repeatedly fails to drive the two lovers apart, Atalanta simply commits herself to finding another man. Like Elviro, she sings light, tuneful, homophonic music that gravitates to the major mode, much in the style of the *galant* Neapolitan operas Chimenti had performed in the 1730s prior to her arrival in London.⁸⁷ And, like those of her male counterpart, Atalanta's arias often

⁸⁷ Chimenti had spent her early career in Naples performing trouser roles in the lighter, pre-classical operas of Pergolesi and Leonardo Leo, before coming to London in 1736 under the Opera of the Nobility. See

seem to poke fun of opera's conventions, just as her character defies the conventional morality of operatic heroines.

One such aria occurs halfway through Act II, when Atalanta manages to convince Xerxes that a love letter from Arsamene to Romilda is in fact addressed to her. She first asks the king's permission to marry Arsamene (who knows nothing of her plan). Xerxes is happy to grant her request: with his brother out of the way, Xerxes will finally be free to take Romilda for himself. Then, in a cunning ploy to cover her deception, Atalanta warns Xerxes in an aria that, if pressed about the letter, Arsamene will insist he loves Romilda. She sings:

<i>Atalanta</i>	Dirà che amor per me	He'll tell you that love for me,
	piagato il cor non gli ha.	has not wounded his heart.
	Ma non gli date fé,	But don't believe him,
	h'egli fingendo va	for he is merely pretending.

Atalanta's aria is unusual in that it communicates a piece of information rather than an emotional state—this was precisely the kind of unrealistic dramaturgy that had attracted so much criticism during opera's early years both in London and abroad.⁸⁸ Nonetheless, the aria perfectly captures the lightness of Atalanta's character, and is representative of

Winton Dean, "Margarita Chimenti," *Grove Music Online* <www.grovemusic.com>, ed. Laura Macy (accessed March 4, 2012).

⁸⁸ See the discussion in Chapter 2, esp. Saint-Evremond: "Can any Man persuade his Imagination, that a Master calls his Servant, or sends him of an Errand singing? That one Friend communicates a Secret to another singing? ... This is to lose the very Life and Soul of Representation." From Charles Gildon, *The life of Mr. Thomas Betterton... with the Judgment of the late Ingenious Monsieur de St. Evremond, upon the Italian and French Music and Opera's; in a Letter to the Duke of Buckingham* (London, 1710).

her music throughout the rest of the opera: it begins without a ritornello and in a major key, it has a lively tempo, a simple homophonic texture, and Atalanta's vocal delivery is mostly declamatory with short, decorative bursts of coloratura (Ex. 1.3).

Example 1.3) *Serse*, Act II, Scene 3. Aria. “Dirà che amor per me” (Atalanta)

Andante allegro

ATALANTA

1. Di - rà che a-mor per me pia - ga-to il cor non gli ha, di-
 Sein Herz sei krank, sagt er, und nie-mals für mich frei, sein

5

Ata. - rà, di - rà ch'a-mor per me pia-ga-to il cor non gli ha
 Herz, sein Herz sei krank, sagt er, und nie-mals für mich frei

9

Ata. pia-ga - to il cor non gli ha, di - rà che a-
 und nie - mals für mich frei, sein Herz sei

13

Ata. - mor per me pia - ga - to il cor non gli ha.
 krank, sagt er, und nie - mals für mich frei.

Immediately following this aria's conclusion, however, a short passage of recitative lends a new dimension to the scene:

<i>Xerxes</i>	Voi quel foglio lasciate a me per prova.	Leave me the note as proof.
<i>Atalanta</i>	(Bella frode, se giova!)	(A great ploy, if it works!)
<i>Xerxes</i>	Itene pure.	You may go.
<i>Atalanta</i>	Ma vi ricordo...	But remember...
<i>Xerxes</i>	E che?	What?
<i>Atalanta</i>	<i>Dirà che non m'amò</i>	<i>He'll tell you he doesn't love me,</i>
	<i>che mai per me languì.</i>	<i>that he never languished for me.</i>
	<i>Ma non credete, no,</i>	<i>But don't believe him, no,</i>
	<i>che fingerà così.</i>	<i>for he is merely pretending.</i>

Suddenly, Atalanta bursts into song again, repeating the very same aria, da capo and all, that she had just finished singing: her twenty-four bars of music are repeated identically, with only slight alterations to her words (Ex. 1.4). Such a literal repetition of a complete aria, again occasioned not by an emotional response but by the sort of minor plot detail normally reserved for secco recitative, is extremely rare in eighteenth-century *opera seria* and unique in all of Handel.

Example 1.4) *Serse*, Act II, Scene 3 (cont.)

17

Ata. *Ma non gli da-te fé, ma non gli da-te fé, ch'e-
Doch glaubt ihm nun nicht mehr, doch glaubt ihm nun nicht mehr, dass*

fine

21 **adagio**

Ata. *- gli fin-gen - do va, fin-gen - do va, ma non gli da - te fé, ch'e-gli fin-gen - do va.
dies die Wahr-heit sei, die Wahr - heit sei, doch glaubt ihm nun nicht mehr, dass dies die Wahr-heit sei.*

4+ 6 da capo

(Recitativo)

25 SERSE ATALANTA

SERSE ATALANTA

*Voi quel fo-glio la-scia-te a me per pro - va. (Bel-la fro - de se
Ü - ber-lasst zum Be-weis doch mir sein Schrei-ben. (Ei-ne Täu-schung wird's*

27 SERSE ATALANTA SERSE

*gio - va.) I - te - ne pu - re. Ma vi ri - cor - do ... E che?
blei - ben.) Geht gu - ten Mu - tes. Darf ich er - in - nern ... Wo - ran? [110]*

(Aria)

Andante allegro

29

ATALANTA

2. Di - rà che non m'a - mò, che mai per me lan-guì,
Er sagt, es sei nicht wahr, dass ich sein Lieb-chen bin,

32

Ata.

di - rà, che mai per me lan-guì, di -
nicht wahr, dass ich sein Lieb - chen bin, er

35

Ata.

- rà che non m'a - mò
sagt, es sei nicht wahr

38

Ata.

—, che mai — per me lan - guì, di - rà che
—, dass ich — sein Lieb - chen bin, er sagt, es

This scene owes its existence, in fact, to Bononcini's version of the opera, which features a nearly identical reprise at the same moment.⁸⁹ According to mid-eighteenth-century operatic norms, however, the sudden reappearance of Atalanta's aria is totally unexpected, and thus comically out of place. In a scene that contemporary theorists and composers would have declared unfit for an aria, Handel here has given us two. The fact that Handel retained this odd feature of Bononcini's seventeenth-century score, which runs so contrary to contemporary practice, again suggests that he intended the scene to be a joke. Like the librettist's disingenuous comment about *Serse*'s allegedly "easy" plot, Handel here seems to be making an ironic statement about Atalanta's "verisimilar" aria, cleverly exploiting the incongruity between her mundane words and her exaggerated means of conveying them. In other words, Atalanta's aria only reinforces the common critical opinion that opera, an art form inescapably rooted in abstract musical expression, was fundamentally incompatible with serious representational drama.

Atalanta's Act I aria, "Sì sì, mio ben," also exploits the conventions of opera seria, in this case, the rigid formal procedures used by early eighteenth-century opera composers, to achieve another sort of comic effect. Addressing her words to Arsamene while in the presence of her sister, Romilda, Atalanta makes a startling and rather inappropriate confession, telling him:

<i>Atalanta</i>	Sì, sì, mio ben, sì, sì,	Yes, yes! my love, yes, yes,
	io vivo per te sol,	I live for you alone,
	io per te moro.	I die for you.

⁸⁹ Bononcini, *Il Xerse*, in Roberts, *Handel Sources*, vol. 8, 143-145.

Amo chi mi ferì,	I love he who wounds me
e pure al mio gran duol	and so my great pain
non ho ristoro.	cannot be overcome.

Despite Atalanta's brazen address to her own sister's betrothed, the emotional tone of her text is more appropriate for a serious aria, which Handel adroitly delivers: set in a haunting F# minor with languid siciliano rhythms and an abundance of striking Neapolitan inflections—characteristic symbols of a pining lover—Atalanta's aria approaches pure pathos in its declaration of unrequited love (Ex. 1.5).

Example 1.5) *Serse*, Act I, Scene 4, Aria. “Sì, sì mio ben” (Atalanta)

(lo guarda con tenerezza, facendogli molti vezzi)
(betrachtet ihn zärtlich und schmeichelt ihm)

ATALANTA

Sì, sì, sì, sì, sì, sì, mio ben, sì, sì, io vi-vo per te sol, io per te
Ja, ja, ja, ja, ja, ja, mein Schatz, ja, ja, ich le-be nur für dich, für dich auch

4

Ata. mo - ro, io per - te vi - vo sol, io
sterb ich, ich le - be nur - für dich, ich

6

Ata. per te vi - vo sol, io per - te mo - ro, io per te mo - ro, sì, sì, sì,
le - be nur für dich, für dich auch sterb ich, für dich auch sterb ich, ja, ja, ja,

9

Ata. sì, mio ben, sì, sì, io vi - vo per - te sol, io per te mo - ro, mio ben, per
ja, mein Schatz, ja, ja, ich le - be nur für dich, für dich auch sterb ich, mein Schatz, für

Divided into two three-line stanzas, the text also suggests a straightforward da capo design, in which the singer would customarily return to repeat the first stanza and its associated music before making her obligatory exit. Handel closely follows this formal plan until the arrival of the da capo return, at which point he makes a crucial change, not only altering the aria's musical trajectory but dramatically changing the meaning of Atalanta's words. After singing both stanzas as expected, the first (A section) in F# minor and the second (B section) in E major/B minor, Atalanta suddenly interrupts her own da capo with a short passage of recitative in order to clarify what she ostensibly meant to say:

<i>Atalanta</i>	Romilda, notte e dì va esclamando così.	Romilda, night and day is exclaiming this.
	<i>Io per te vivo sol,</i>	<i>I live for you alone,</i>
	<i>Io per te moro, etc.</i>	<i>I die for you, etc.</i>


Once she has explained her intended meaning in secco recitative—"This is what Romilda always says"—Atalanta unexpectedly picks up fragments of her A section material in a considerably abridged return to finish her incomplete aria, as if now speaking for her sister (Ex. 1.6). The abrupt clarification, placed in the middle of the aria, is wholly Handel's invention, and its rhetorical effect is doubly comic: it both inverts the meaning of Atalanta's previous words and subverts our musical expectations by featuring a passage of recitative where a da capo should have been.

Example 1.6) *Serse*, Act I, Scene 4, Aria. “Sì, sì mio ben,” cont. (Atalanta)


12

Ata. 

15

Ata. 

18

Ata. 

21

Ata. 

24

Ata.

ho ri - sto - ro. Ro - mil-da not-te e di va es - cla-man-do co - sì: «Io
Schmerz ver-kehrt sie sich. Am Ta-ge und bei Nacht be-kennt Ro - mil - da nur dies: „Für

27

Ata.

per _ te mo - ro, io per te mo - ro, io per te vi - vo sol _ , io _
dich _ auch sterb _ ich, für dich auch sterb _ ich, ich le - be nur für dich _ , für _

30

Ata.

(parte)
(geht ab)

per te mo - ro, io per _ te _ mo - ro, io per te mo - ro.»
dich auch sterb ich, für dich _ auch sterb _ ich, für dich auch sterb ich. [76]

Handel's formal alteration greatly heightens the humor of this scene, for Atalanta secretly does love Arsamene, a subplot that, as we have seen, has significant consequences for all characters involved. But Atalanta's interruption also draws attention to the da capo convention itself, because we now "rehear" Atalanta's words refracted through Romilda's perspective and through our own knowledge of the comic situation. Ironically, by providing a rational justification for Atalanta's da capo, Handel only underscores the fundamental irrationality of the convention itself, which demanded that a text be obligatorily repeated regardless of its contribution to the dramatic situation. Like Elviro's mock-outburst of rage, "Sì, sì mio ben" momentarily shifts our focus from the situational comedy provided by the coy, coquettish Atalanta to a subtle critique of the compositional features of opera itself, essentially reproducing the parodic attacks of Handel's contemporaries.

These are not the only musical numbers in *Serse* that suggest a satirical intent. Atalanta's poignant, stunningly brief aria fragment in Act II, "A piangere ogn'ora," lasts a mere four measures before it is interrupted by Elviro's comic flower song, again undercutting the serious aspects of her character.⁹⁰ Likewise, in Act I, Scene 3, Arsamene seems to spoof the da capo convention when he slavishly repeats the music of Xerxes's "Io le dirò che l'amo," but twists his brother's words to opposite effect.⁹¹ The Act II duet sung by an unfaithful Xerxes and his spurned fiancée, Amastre, comically plays on

⁹⁰ A similar event occurs in Bononcini's setting. See Dean, *Handel's Operas: 1726-1741*, 441.

⁹¹ This scene is also indebted to Bononcini, *Ibid.*, 431, n. 17.

operatic stereotypes by inverting the traditional duet: instead of uniting the voices of sympathetic, reciprocating lovers, the unusual scene instead presents the jilted couple, neither of whom can see the other, on opposite sides of the stage, sullenly lamenting their own rejection. Another duet in Act III reveals Arsamene and Romilda in the midst of a lovers' spat.

Many scholars have noted yet more scenes in *Serse* that seem to convey an ironic message: Hugo Leichtentritt once heard self-parodic qualities in Xerxes's long Act I love song, "Più che penso"; Paul Henry Lang called "Saprà delle mie offese," Amastre's Act I coloratura showpiece, a "light travesty of the traditional rage aria"; and John Merrill Knapp has taken issue with the common opinion that Arsamene's "Amor, tiranno, amor" betrays a similarly disingenuous tone.⁹² None of this, of course, is to mention the virtually unanimous critical assessment of Xerxes's catastrophic finale, "Crude furie," with which this chapter began.

If some of the formal irregularities found in Handel's musical setting can be traced back to Bononcini's score from the 1690s, a time when such formal interruptions, repetitions, and fragmentations were not uncommon, such a flagrant disregard of established operatic conventions was by 1738 almost unthinkable: it is telling that one of the primary reasons the Earl of Shaftesbury found *Serse*'s plot so hard to follow was a

⁹² Leichtentritt, *Handel* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1924), 732; Lang, *Handel*, 300; Knapp, *Handel's Later Operas*, ch. 20, p. 32. Knapp considers Handel's music for this aria to "breathe sincerity."

direct result of the opera's unusual formal design.⁹³ In this way, Handel's decision to retain and emulate many of Bononcini's aria forms does much more than simply betray his opera's indebtedness to a seventeenth-century model. It underscores the rigidity and dramatic arbitrariness of the musical conventions that had hardened over the intervening years. As we have seen, moreover, several formal anomalies in Handel's adaptation were of his own creation, such as his drastic abbreviation of Elviro's angry outburst and the comic interruption in Atalanta's backhanded declaration of love. Within the context of mid-eighteenth-century musical practice, such formal departures would have seemed radically new, and unmistakably funny, to contemporary audiences. One might say that their inclusion is the only thing that makes such scenes comic at all.

THWARTING EXPECTATIONS

It is no wonder that Handel's contemporaries called *Serse* a "ballad opera." Whether its features correspond to English popular theater or can be traced to an older time and place, the opera's comic characters, the brevity of its arias, and the playful way in which it calls upon musical conventions all point to a kind of comic experimentation that seems much closer to operatic burlesque than so-called "serious" opera. Which naturally raises the question: why the self-parody? Why would Handel deliberately create a work that was largely preoccupied with making fun of itself and, by extension, everything that Handel's

⁹³ Specifically, Shaftesbury complained of the lack of recitative between the arias to explain the action: "The airs too, for brevity's sake[,] as the opera would otherwise be too long[,] fall without any recitativ' intervening from one into another that 'tis difficult to understand till it comes by frequent hearing to be well known." in Burrows and Dunhill, *Music and Theatre in Handel's World*, 49.

career had represented for the past twenty years? Was *Serse* really, as Dent suggested, merely “a desperate attempt to keep up with the taste of the day?”

There is much to recommend this point of view. As we have seen, Handel’s brief partnership with John Rich suggested a man who was extremely sensitive to the theatrical world around him, readily adapting his works to suit the tastes of fickle London audiences. By incorporating features of popular English theater such as dance, machinery, and spectacular effects into his Covent Garden operas, features that had been largely absent from the operas of his Royal Academy years, Handel demonstrated his willingness to broaden the genre of Italian opera to accommodate public demand. By doing so, he seemed to confirm what had already been a longstanding opinion in early eighteenth-century Britain: that opera was an intrinsically popular form of theater, one that appealed primarily to the senses, not to rational thought, and thus had more in common with Rich’s pantomimes than it with did serious spoken drama.

As operatic farce grew in popularity over the decade, reaching its pinnacle during the 1737-38 season, Handel again found himself faced with dwindling audiences, inadequate finances, and a flourishing theatrical world that treated Italian opera with contempt. Handel would have thus been well poised to make another concession to popular opinion, expanding the definition of Italian opera once again to include extraneous elements—comic scenes, simple tunes, elements of burlesque—that would bring it in line with the popular works of his competitors. More than any work in Handel’s career, *Serse* would seem to be the ideal candidate for this new kind of “populist,” comic opera.

Yet, apart from the unmistakable humor that permeates *Serse*'s score and the clever formal conceit with which it is frequently achieved, one cannot help but hear more than a hint of sincerity, even of sorrow, in the opera's comic strains. Atalanta's halting, plangent "Sì, sì mio ben," for example, resembles any number of similar arias in Handel's operas, gravely serious in tone, that stand at the most emotionally powerful moments of the drama. At least two of these can be found in *Serse* itself, both sung by Arsamene: "Quella che tutta fè," another despondent minor-mode siciliano, and "Non so se sia la speme," in which Neapolitan dissonances jarringly puncture the harmonic fabric at every turn (Ex. 1.7).

Example 1.7) *Serse*, Act I, Scene 12. Aria. “Non so se sia la speme” (Arsamene)

6 ARSAMENE §

Ars. Non so se sia la spe-me che mi so-stie - ne in vi - ta, o
 Wer weiß, ob Hoff-nungs-seh-nen mich mehr ans Le - ben bin - det, als

11

Ars. l'a-spro mio do - lor, o l'a-spro mio do - lor, non
 die - se See - len - qual, als die - se See - len - qual, wer

17

Ars. so se sia la spe-me che mi *) so-sten-ga in vi - ta, o l'a-spro mio do - lor —, o
 weiß, ob Hoff-nungs-seh-nen mich mehr ans Le - ben bin-det, als die - se See - len - qual —, als

23 **adagio**

Ars. l'a-spro mio do - lor, o l'a - spro mio do - lor, o l'a -
 die - se See - len - qual, als die - se See - len - qual, als die -

29 **a tempo** (parte) (geht ab)

Ars. - spro mio do - lor.
 - se See - len - qual. [124]

The stylistic similarities between Arsamene's bitter lament, arguably among the opera's most stirring numbers, and what in Atalanta's aria was clearly meant to be a joke, raise an important question about Handel's use of musical humor in *Serse* and the precise way in which that humor has been achieved. As we have seen, the question was a non-issue in other operatic farces of the time, which felt no need to exaggerate or misrepresent eighteenth-century musical conventions. To men like Fielding, Carey, and Lampe, opera's absurdity simply spoke for itself. With Handel, however, we can never be too sure, for despite the opera's comic features and parodic strategies, *Serse* still operates within the traditional constraints of eighteenth-century *opera seria*: in fact, if it didn't, much of its humor would be lost.

Thwarting our expectations always presupposes our knowledge of what to expect. When Handel subtly interrupts an aria, repeats it, or introduces a superfluous da capo, he does so against the background of a stable musical tradition in which such events would be out of the ordinary. In this way, *Serse*'s unique form of musical comedy depends upon the very conventions it ridicules. Whether in the formal failure of an aria, the poignancy of a Neapolitan sixth, or the stormy scales of catastrophe, Handel's skillful manipulation of operatic conventions—not his mere observance or rejection of them—becomes the instrument by which he achieves his comic ends, even while his music retains its most effective (and affective) rhetorical means. By using musical conventions to undermine the seriousness of Italian opera, in other words, Handel brilliantly provides the justification for their preservation: he shows us that only true opera can achieve the

musical burlesque, a crucial point that his parodists failed to realize, and were ultimately unable to accomplish.

CHAPTER 2

LAUGHTER, UPROAR, AND THE SUSPENSION OF (DIS)BELIEF:

THE LONDON OPERA AUDIENCE, 1710-1744

In a May 1787 issue of the short-lived Oxford periodical, *Olla Podrida*, the Reverend Thomas Monroe gave the following account of an Italian opera he had attended while visiting London:

I was once present (*credite dicenti*) in the pit at the Opera, during the representation of *Macbeth*—On my right hand sat an unthinking Englishman, who, forgetful that he was a spectator of a serious performance, burst into a horse-laugh, just at the very time when Lady Macbeth and her *caro sposo* were conjuring up all the horror that heads and heels were capable of exciting. Her Ladyship, conscious that she brandished her dagger in tune, and that she rubbed off the “damn’d spot” from her hand most harmoniously, ... was very highly as well as very justly enraged. The curtain fell, and the Signora declared she would never appear again before an English audience. In vain did the distressed Manager represent to her, that the taste, the judgment, the every thing of this unhappy nation were infinitely beneath her notice; heaping at the same time upon poor John Bull, a profusion of epithets, all ending in *-issimo*. ... At last, however, the kind interference of a noble frequenter of the Opera-house, produced a reconciliation. He could not but confess the headstrong vulgarity, and

unreasonable prejudices of his countrymen, who considered every competition with their favorite poet as a burlesque and an insult. ... He, moreover, spiritedly declared that he would call any person to a very severe account, who should dare to laugh, when on the printed bills of the night was written, in large characters, “a serious Opera.”⁹⁴

There is reason to suspect that this incident never took place. For one thing, no Italian opera on the subject of *Macbeth* had ever been performed in London: though British productions of *Macbeth* as a spoken play had contained incidental music throughout most of the eighteenth century, Shakespeare’s tragedy would have to wait for Verdi to receive its first operatic setting in Italian.⁹⁵ Moreover, Monroe’s sarcastic tone, from his description of the *prima donna*’s “harmonious” scrubbing to his tongue-in-cheek admission of Britain’s inferior taste, raises considerable doubts about the story’s authenticity.

Yet certain details of Monroe’s description do seem to point to a real event. Two years earlier, in March of 1785, the Franco-Italian dancer Charles Lepicq presented a ballet adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* to the audience at London’s Haymarket Theater (Fig. 2).⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Thomas Monroe (also Monro, 1764-1815), *Olla Podrida*, May 26, 1787.

⁹⁵ David Rosen and Andrew Porter, *Verdi’s Macbeth: A Sourcebook* (New York, 1984), xv.

⁹⁶ Advertisement in the *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, March 14, 1785.

Figure 2) *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser*, March 14, 1785

KING'S THEATRE.
For the BENEFIT of MADAME ROSSI.
ON THURSDAY, March 17th, will be per-
formed,
A favourite Comic OPERA;
With a Divertissement, in which will be introduced,
The COSSACK.
And, for the First Time,
A Grand New HEROIC BALLET,
Composed by Mr. LE P. CQ.
Founded on SHAKESPEARE's Historical Plan of
MACBETH.
• • Tickets Half a Guinea each, to be had of Mad.
Rossi, No. 33, Pall-mall.

Set to music that had long been associated with the spoken play, mostly by Matthew Locke and Richard Leveridge (with new music by Françoise-Hippolyte Bathélemon), Lepicq's "heroic ballet" featured several foreign dancers and contained vocal parts performed by Italian singers from the Haymarket Opera.⁹⁷ The performance was in English, but at least one review seems to corroborate Monroe's testimony about laughter being heard in the audience. On March 19, two days after the ballet's single performance, the *Morning Herald* complained that "The Spectres who rise before Macbeth, and sing an Italian recitative, by way of prophetic warning, produce the most farcical effect, from their exclaiming in foreign accent, 'Macabet!'"⁹⁸ Whether Monroe mistakenly remembered Lepicq's ballet to be an opera or deliberately falsified his story to heighten the satire, his account serves as a plausible description of the Haymarket audience's response to the Italian singers.

Monroe's story and the laughter he describes are not isolated anecdotes but belong to a longstanding British tradition of regarding Italian opera as an irrational, outlandish art form unfit for the English stage. Ever since its earliest appearances in London, opera had been viciously condemned for a number of reasons familiar to anyone studying the period today: not only was it in Italian, thus preventing most Britons from following the action, but the poetry was often deemed so bad that many thought the libretti not worth

⁹⁷ Rachele D'Orta sang the role of Lady Macbeth, while Gertruda Rossi performed her part in dance. See the *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, March 18, 1785, and the *Public Advertiser*, 18 March, 1785.

⁹⁸ *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser*, March 19, 1785. The ballet seems to have been abandoned entirely after the first performance, though an author writing in the *Morning Chronicle* on March 21 rallied for its continuation: "With a few obvious alterations, as the omission of the hacked English Macabet, &c,—there can be no doubt of the Ballet acting with great attraction for several nights to come."

understanding at all.⁹⁹ Others criticized the extravagant salaries paid to foreign singers, the high cost of production generally, and the exalted position given to the castrati, who were widely considered “monstrous” and “effeminate.”¹⁰⁰

An equally common accusation leveled at Italian opera, though, one that sought to undermine its basic claim to legitimacy as a dramatic art, had to do with its incapacity for verisimilitude. The Irish playwright Richard Steele summarized the British view of Italian opera in one of the very first issues of *The Tatler* from 1709:

For the Stage being an Entertainment of the Reason and all our Faculties, this Way of being pleas'd with the Suspence of 'em for Three Hours together, and being given up to the shallow Satisfaction of the Eyes and Ears only, seems to arise rather from the Degeneracy of our Understanding than an Improvement of our Diversions.¹⁰¹

Steele's argument, one shared by many of his countrymen including his co-editor, Joseph Addison, was that opera, which pleased only the senses, “suspended reason,” and thus could not convey the serious or noble sentiments found in spoken drama. Whether

⁹⁹ For a summary of opera criticism in early eighteenth-century Britain, see Lowell Lindgren, “Critiques of Opera in London, 1705-1719,” in *Il melodramma italiano in Italia e Germania nell'età barocca*, ed. Alberto Colzani, Norbert Dubowy, Andrea Luppi and Maurizio Padoan (Como: Antiquae musicae italicae studiosi, 1995): 143-65. Also see Suzanne Aspden, “An Infinity of Factions: Opera in Eighteenth-Century London and the Undoing of Society,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 9 (1997): 1-19.

¹⁰⁰ See Gary C. Thomas, ““Was George Frideric Handel Gay?": On Closet Questions and Cultural Politics,” in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 1994), 155-204; Todd S. Gilman, “The Italian (Castrato) in London,” in *The Work of Opera: Genre, Nationhood, Sexual Difference*, ed. Richard Dellamora and Daniel Fischlin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 49-71.

¹⁰¹ *The Tatler* No. 4, April 19, 1709.

seducing audiences with its soothing music and spectacular machinery or rendering profound situations ridiculous by presenting them in song, opera was frequently accused of being nothing more than a catalogue of absurdities.

Of course, some of the earliest and most influential British critiques of opera were written by Addison himself, whose essays in the *Tatler* (1709-11) and the *Spectator* (1711-12), received wide circulation and were reprinted more than a dozen times in the century following his death. A recurring complaint within Addison's critical writings concerns opera's supposed "irregularities," the perceived incongruities that arise when an operatic performance comes into conflict with the drama it presents. Addison writes:

There is nothing that more startled our English Audience, than the Italian *Recitativo* at its first Entrance upon the Stage. People were wonderfully surprised to hear Generals singing the Word of Command, and Ladies delivering Messages in Musick. Our Country-men could not forbear laughing when they heard a Lover chanting out a Billet-doux, and even the Superscription of a Letter set to a Tune.¹⁰²

Again, we hear of laughter at the opera house, not unlike the horse-laugh that would shatter the silence at Lepicq's *Macbeth* over seventy years later. And like Monroe's irreverent operagoer, Addison ridicules the basic convention of singing, which he sees as antithetical to the classical principles of dramatic theater.

¹⁰² *The Spectator* No. 29, April 3, 1711. For a similar account, see the British actor William Penkethman's proposal for a new puppet show, printed in the *Tatler* No. 283, January 27, 1711: "In order to prevent a Thing that has been more than once laugh'd at in Opera's, I had some Intentions of obliging, if I could, (by a certain Magic) all the necessary Letters to sing and deliver themselves."

Addison was not the first to make this claim. He seems to have taken his cue from Charles de Saint-Denis, Sieur de Saint-Évremond, a French nobleman and man of letters who had expatriated to London in 1661, and whose work Addison would surely have known.¹⁰³ Saint-Évremond's famous *Letter to the Duke of Buckingham*, written in 1678 and first translated into English in 1686, provided an important early model for eighteenth-century British criticism of opera and was reprinted several times over the next hundred years.¹⁰⁴ In his letter, Saint-Évremond called opera one of the "most impossible" things that mankind had ever produced, in particular because of the preeminence it gave to singing over naturalistic representation:

There is another thing in Operas so much against nature, that my Imagination is offended with it, and that is to make the whole Stage do nothing but sing from the beginning to the end; as if the Persons represented were bound most ridiculously in Musick to treat both the most common and the most important Affairs to their Lives. Can any Man fancy, that a Master should call his Servant, or give him Orders for such or such things, while he is singing? that one Friend should declare a Secret to another in a Song? that Men should deliberate in a Privy Counsel

¹⁰³ Saint-Évremond's writing is cited in at least two issues of the *Spectator*. See issues of November 3, 1711 and April 10, 1712.

¹⁰⁴ On Saint-Évremond's importance to British writings on opera in the early eighteenth century, see Henrik Knif, *Gentlemen and Spectators: Studies in Journals, Opera & the Social Scene in Late Stuart London* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 1995), 67-71; on his influence in France, see Georgia Cowart, *The Origins of Modern Musical Criticism: French and Italian Music, 1600-1750* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981), 23-24.

Singing? or, that they should melodiously kill one another in a duel? This is the downright way to lose the Life of Representation.¹⁰⁵

The immense appeal that such ideas would have in Britain, a nation that prided itself on a long tradition of vernacular spoken drama, should not surprise us: it is telling that Saint-Évremond's attack on opera was twice reprinted by British thespians, once as an appendix to Charles Gildon's 1710 biography of the famed actor, Thomas Betterton, and again in *The Prompter* (1734-6), a theatrical paper founded by the playwright and Handel's former collaborator, Aaron Hill.¹⁰⁶ To men like Addison and Hill—who were both, after all, playwrights and onetime opera librettists—Italian opera not only represented “a burlesque and an insult” to English poets, but also posed a considerable threat to their livelihood.

It would be easy to dismiss these critiques as simple cases of nationalistic bias or professional resentment were it not for the astonishing number of similar accounts that survive from these years, even from those who regularly attended the opera. For example, in a lengthy defense of Italian opera from the anonymous theatrical tract, *The*

¹⁰⁵ Saint-Évremond, *Miscellanea: or Various Discourses upon: 1. Tragedy, 2. Comedy, 3. The Italian, 4. The English Comedy, 5. And Operas, to his Grace, the D. of Buckingham* (London, 1786), 42. Quoted in Knif, *Gentlemen and Spectators*, 67.

¹⁰⁶ Early in his career, Aaron Hill had worked with Giacomo Rossi on the libretto of Handel's first London opera, *Rinaldo* (1711). See Robert D. Hume, “Hill, Aaron” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. Stanley Sadie. *Grove Music Online* <www.grovemusic.com> (accessed March 26, 2012). Saint-Évremond's letter was reprinted in Charles Gildon, *The life of Mr. Thomas Betterton, the late eminent tragedian... with the Judgment of the late Ingenious Monsieur de St. Evremond, upon the Italian and French Music and Opera's; in a Letter to the Duke of Buckingham* (London, 1710); and excerpts were reprinted in *The Prompter* No. 155, April 30, 1736.

Touchstone (1728), we learn the opinion of some operagoers whose great appreciation for music could not overcome their objections to its dramatic shortcomings:

As an Italian Opera can never touch the comprehension of above one Part in four of a British Audience, it is very probable their Theatre will be crowded as long as we are a Nation. But since the bare Name of an Italian Opera, as established at present amongst us, is to the last Degree shocking to the Ears of many honest Inhabitants of this Metropolis, in order to remove all groundless Prejudices, let us briefly and impartially ... wipe off, or at least compound for, those things they look upon as Absurdities or Impositions. ... [Some people] are charmed with the Musick; particularly the Airs; but nauseate the odious Recitative, or that the Whole of an Opera should be sung. They die with Laughing to hear a Tyrant rage and storm in a vast Regularity of Sounds, a General sing at the Head of an Army, or a Lover, Swan-like, expire at his Mistress's Feet; and that there is not an imperial Mandate, a Word of Command, or Billet-doux delivered but in expressive Flats and Sharps.¹⁰⁷

This description, though presented as an apologia of operatic conventions, reads like the irreverent critiques of Addison and Saint-Évremond, even featuring similar language and many of the same examples used in earlier critiques (*e.g.* generals, lovers, "billets-doux," etc.). A key distinction, however, is the author's contention that audience members who

¹⁰⁷ *The Touchstone* (London, 1728), 12. Wrongly attributed to James Ralph; see Lowell Lindgren, "Another Critic namely Samber," *Festa Musicologica, Essays in Honor of George J. Buelow* (New York: Pendragon 1995).

laughed at Italian opera genuinely enjoyed the music, and presumably continued to attend despite their misgivings: opera's susceptibility to ridicule did not preclude its ability to entertain. Although we have no way of knowing the extent to which such sentiments were shared by opera audiences in general, one thing is certain: this laughter was real, and it formed an important part of the British operagoing experience.

In this chapter, I will consider the different ways in which laughter could arise during live performances of Italian opera seria, in order to explore the role that humor played in the early British reception of "serious" opera. I hope to show that the accusations of absurdity leveled at opera by its detractors had real corollaries in live operatic performance, and that such absurdities were understood, and even enjoyed, by British audiences. I will then turn to a more detailed examination of one incident—the infamous "divas scandal" of 1727—to consider the ways in which audience disruption and raucous laughter may have contributed to opera's immense popularity in London during Handel's Royal Academy years. As we will see, opera in performance often took on very different meanings than anything the notated score and libretto could ever convey, or indeed that the composer and librettist would have ever intended.

ACCIDENTS AND MISHAPS: RUPTURING THE OPERATIC TEXT

Seldom a night we played, but some awkward accident occurred, that made the audience laugh as much at a tragedy, as at the drollest farce we could perform, and I verily believe, the hopes of such accidents, drew more to the theatre than any real inclination to see the piece.¹⁰⁸

This description of British theatrical life, from John Trusler's fictional memoir *Modern Times* (1785), offers a provocative view of eighteenth-century theatergoing habits, and could just as easily describe the attitude held by opera audiences in Handel's time.

Newspapers, pamphlets, letters, and diaries from opera's early years in London are rife with giddy descriptions of failed operatic events—slip-ups, mishaps, interruptions and outbursts—and they are as entertaining to read today as the operas themselves must have been to watch. Such incidents provided opera audiences with a theatrical experience that is often overlooked by Handel scholars today, one that was centered around the ephemeral moments that were both unique to an evening's performance and entirely independent of the operatic text.

Stage accidents in particular provided one of the most common causes for laughter: the numerous, humorous accounts of falling sets, malfunctioning props, and failed machinery from these years reveal the many ways in which opposing representational worlds could collide in opera, the result of which was often comically, and delightfully, absurd. One incident, recounted in *The Prompter*, occurred at a production of Handel's *Ottone* in December of 1734, when the machinery controlling the waves of the sea

¹⁰⁸ John Trusler, *Modern Times, or the adventures of Gabriel Outcast*, vol. 3 (London, 1785), 8.

malfunctioned:

I do, now and then, nim a crown from my heir to go and hear an opera. T'other night I went to my favorite one, *Otho*, but, Death to my Ears! in the midst of the finest song that ever Angel (that is to say, Farinelli) sung, the Sea, at the further End of the stage, that used to turn round silently, and naturally, upon its own Axis, broke through all Decorums at once and squeaked like Fifty Bag-Pipes.¹⁰⁹

The author's recommendation: "Be so good as to prompt the managers in one of your papers, and admonish them to grease their ocean a little better, against next time." Like the convention of singing itself, such events were deemed ludicrous because of their perceived incompatibility with naturalistic representation.

Similar mishaps could take on new levels of humor when they seemed to openly contradict an opera's story or subject matter. Horace Walpole remembered once seeing Senesino play the title role in Handel's *Alessandro* (1727), when, during the opera's opening battle scene, he "so far forgot himself in the heat of the conquest, as to stick his sword into one of the pasteboard stones of the wall of the town, and bore it in triumph before him as he entered the breach."¹¹⁰

Senesino, the famous castrato known for being large and ungainly, seemed particularly susceptible to such blunders (Fig. 3). After a performance of Handel's *Giulio Cesare* in the early 1730s, a writer for *Fog's Weekly Journal* wrote:

¹⁰⁹ *The Prompter* No. 16, January 3, 1735.

¹¹⁰ *The World*, February 8, 1753. Quoted in Dean, *Handel's Operas: 1726-1741*, 24.

There happen'd an Accident when I was last at the Opera of *Julius Caesar* ... A Piece of the Machinery tumbled down from the Roof of the Theatre upon the Stage just as Senesino had chanted forth these Words:

Cesare non seppe mai, che sia timore.

Caesar does not know what Fear is.

The poor Hero was so frightened, that he trembled, lost his Voice, and fell a-crying. Every Tyrant or Tyrannical Minister is just such a Caesar as Senesino.¹¹¹

The author's reference is to Act II, Scene 8 of Handel's opera, just after Caesar has discovered Cleopatra's true identity and learned of her love for him. When Cleopatra tells him to flee from the approaching conspirators, Caesar delivers the quoted line, "Cesare non seppe mai, che sia timore," and prepares the scene for his virtuoso aria that follows, "Al lampo dell' armi," in which the hero promises revenge and affirms the convictions of his "warring soul" ("quest'alma guerriera").

¹¹¹ *Fog's Weekly Journal*, February 10, 1733.

Figure 3) A. M. Zanetti, Caricature of Senesino (n.d)



The sudden crash of the set, and Senesino's frightened response, would not only have deprived Caesar of his aria, but also undermined the integrity of his heroic character and thus the believability of the entire plot. By momentarily confusing Senesino the singer with the character he was portraying, incidents like these could provoke audiences to drastically reevaluate the dramatic situation, and, in this case, even the moral message of the opera as a whole. Rather than the figure of noble heroism his character represents, Senesino becomes the embodiment of cowardly hypocrisy, a tyrant in all but name.

Richard Steele, writing in the *Spectator* in 1711, gives us another amusing anecdote about a mishap involving the Haymarket stage hands during an early production of Handel's *Rinaldo*:

At the Hay-Market, the Undertakers forgetting to change their Side-Scenes, we were presented with a Prospect of the Ocean in the midst of a delightful Grove; and tho' the Gentleman on the Stage had very much contributed to the Beauty of the Grove by walking up and down between the Trees, I must own I was not a little ashamed to see a well-dressed young Fellow, in a full-bottomed Wigg, appear in the midst of the Sea, and without any visible Concern, taking Snuff.¹¹²

What renders this scene ridiculous, of course, is not just the mismatched scenery but the presence of that other time-honored theatrical tradition: the wealthy opera patrons who wandered around onstage. Steele satirizes this custom by suggesting that the noblemen on

¹¹² *The Spectator* No. 14, March 16, 1711. Signed "R" in the letter, indicating a contribution from Steele.

display were usually not distracting in the least, so long as they blended in with the scenery.

Contemporary evidence, on the other hand, indicates otherwise: early attempts had been made to prohibit audience members from going onstage since at least 1704, when Queen Anne issued a royal proclamation forbidding the practice, but such measures were largely unsuccessful.¹¹³ Just ten months after Steele's story, opera audiences again had to be reminded, "No Person to stand on the Stage,"¹¹⁴ and the Haymarket directors would continue to have difficulties enforcing the rule for many years. In 1720, those wishing to attend Handel's *Radamisto* still had the option "to be admitted on the Stage one Guinea,"¹¹⁵ and stage tickets were occasionally allowed for well-attended operas well into the thirties, especially on benefit nights (Fig. 4). And before a performance of Handel's *Amadigi* in 1715, a newspaper announcement apologetically explained that audience members would be endangered by the stage machinery if they came onstage: "it is therefore hop'd no Body, even the Subscribers, will take it Ill that they must be deny'd Entrance on the Stage."¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Leo Hughes, *The Drama's Patrons* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 21.

¹¹⁴ Advertisement for *Rinaldo* in January 1712, quoted in Deutsch, 49.

¹¹⁵ *Daily Courant*, May 13, 1720. Quoted in Deutsch, 105.

¹¹⁶ *Daily Courant*, May 25, 1715. For more on the machinery included in *Amadigi*, see Dean and Knapp, 287-8.

Figure 4) *The Daily Courant*, May 13, 1720

AT the King's Theatre in the Hay-Market, To-morrow, being Saturday, the 14th of May, will be perform'd a New Opera call'd, RADAMISTUS. Boxes 8 s. Pit 5 s. Gallery 2 s. 6 d. Boxes on the Stage Half a Guinea. N. B. The Communication from the Stage to the Side Boxes on Market-Lane Side being taken off, the Admittance to them will be through the Passage that leads to the Pit on the Left Hand. To be admitted on the Stage One Guinea. To begin at Half an Hour after Six.

In the *General Evening Post* of March 15, 1735, a description of Farinelli's benefit concert attested, "The Seats placed on the Stage contain'd several hundred People," and Cuzzoni's benefit concert in March 1723 also had benches placed onstage.¹¹⁷ In the realm of English spoken theater, stage seats would continue to be used until 1762, when David Garrick finally abolished them and expanded the size of the Drury Lane auditorium.¹¹⁸

Such an allowance provided yet another reason for audiences to look forward to unexpected interruptions and distractions, and promised countless opportunities for comic intrusion into what was ostensibly a serious musical drama. Moreover, as the lighthearted tone of these accounts attest, the audience's reaction to such accidents rarely seems to have been offense or outrage. Rather, they seem to have shared a participatory sense of fun, and a welcoming embrace of the unpredictable. Whether such comic ruptures were incidental to a given evening's performance or intrinsic to the operatic idiom itself, they were unique to the live event, and depended for their meaning upon a present audience more than they did on a stable text.

In light of the important role that the audience played in the reception of Italian opera during Handel's lifetime, I would therefore like to turn to a consideration of the London opera audience, by tracing the rise and fall of Italian opera's popularity during Handel's Royal Academy years. By reexamining the events that led to one of the most famous scandals in opera history—the rivalry between the two sopranos, Faustina

¹¹⁷ The *Daily Courant*, March 26, 1723 reprinted in Deutsch, 151.

¹¹⁸ See Henry William Pedicord, *The Theatrical Public in the Time of Garrick* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1954), 55.

Bordoni and Francesca Cuzzoni—I hope to illustrate the important role that audiences themselves played in the creation and encouragement of such comic moments.

OPERA CRAZES AND EMPTY HOUSES

But we ought not entirely to form our Judgment of its being the very worst play ... at a time when it was the Fashion to condemn them all, right or wrong, without being heard; and when Parties were made to go to new Plays to make Uproars, which they called by the odious Name of The Funn of the first Night.¹¹⁹

Italian opera seria reached the height of its popularity in London during the 1720s, when the Royal Academy of Music, granted its charter and a royal subsidy from George I in 1719, mounted nearly thirty new operas over the course of eight years.¹²⁰ Despite a slow first season and the prohibitive costs of the venture, audience attendance during the Academy's early years surpassed all expectations, and by the season of 1721-22 the opera directors had even managed to turn a modest profit.¹²¹ Between April 1720 and the

¹¹⁹ Samuel Johnson on the poor reception of Anthony Brown's *Fatal Retirement*, in *A Compleat List of All Dramatic Authors* (London, 1747). Quoted in Hughes, *The Drama's Patrons*, 63.

¹²⁰ The operas were primarily by Handel, Giovanni Bononcini, and Attilio Ariosti. For a complete table of Royal Academy performances between 1720 and 1728, see Winton Dean and John Merrill Knapp, *Handel's Operas: 1704-1726* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 308-9. The most detailed history of the administration and finances of the Royal Academy is Elizabeth Gibson's *The Royal Academy of Music, 1719-1728: The Institution and Its Directors* (New York: Garland, 1989).

¹²¹ The directors of the Royal Academy reported a seven percent profit during the season of 1721-22. This would be the only year that the Royal Academy's ticket and subscription sales exceeded expenses. See Gibson, 159.

spring of 1723, the Royal Academy mounted more than two hundred performances, including over twenty well-attended productions of Handel's *Radamisto* and *Floridante*, a similar number of Bononcini's *Crispo* and *Griselda*, and a staggering twenty-nine performances of Bononcini's *Astarto*, at which several ticket holders were turned away "for want of Room, and others were obliged to stand during the whole performance."¹²²

By January of 1723, tickets to Handel's *Ottone* were selling for six to eight times their original price, and crowds had become so large that they were spreading into the footmen's gallery, where ensuing fights between audience members almost forced the gallery to be closed.¹²³ The following month, John Gay pronounced opera "the reigning Amusement of the town."¹²⁴ Newspapers predicted "that if this Company goes on with the same Success as they have done for some Time past, of which there is no doubt, it will become considerable enough to be engrafted on some of our Corporations in the City, the Taste of the Publick for Musick being so much improv'd lately."¹²⁵

¹²² Advertisement for *Astarto* in *The Daily Courant*, November, 1720. See Gibson, 142. Handel's first biographer, John Mainwaring, described a similar situation at the revival of Handel's *Radamisto* earlier that year: "In so splendid and fashionable an assembly of ladies (to the excellence of their taste we must impute it) there was no shadow of form, or ceremony, scarce indeed any appearance of order or regularity, politeness or decency. Many who had forc'd their way into the house with an impetuosity but ill suited to their rank and sex, actually fainted through the excessive heat and closeness of it. Several gentlemen were turned back, who had offered forty shillings for a seat in the gallery, after having despaired of getting any in the pit or boxes." Quoted in Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1955), 105.

¹²³ Dean and Knapp, 436.

¹²⁴ Letter to Jonathan Swift, February 3, 1723. Reprinted in Deutsch, 149.

¹²⁵ *London Journal*, February 16, 1723. Quoted in Dean and Knapp, 312.

Within four short years, the Royal Academy would find itself in severe financial difficulties, and the company collapsed entirely the following season. Handel's last two Academy operas, *Radamisto* and *Siroe*, were said to have been performed "to almost Empty Benches,"¹²⁶ and the company's last performance was given on June 1, 1728.

It seems hard to believe that such a remarkable string of early successes could have led so quickly to the Royal Academy's demise, but most scholars attribute the collapse to three main causes:¹²⁷ dwindling company funds and the high cost of opera generally, particularly the exorbitant salaries given to the singers; the public scandal that arose from the rivalry between Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni in the spring of 1727; and the premiere in January 1728 of Gay's immensely popular parody and social satire, *The Beggar's Opera*, which Elizabeth Gibson has called "the final blow to the Italian company which was already tottering from the antics of its singers."¹²⁸

This is not to say that the Royal Academy had not faced difficulties earlier. Even when opera seemed insurmountable in London—such as during the 1721-1722 season, the only year in which the Royal Academy made a profit—one can still find accounts of thin audiences and indifferent public reception.¹²⁹ There is evidence, however, that opera

¹²⁶ *The Touchstone* (London, 1728), wrongly attributed to James Ralph. See Lowell Lindgren, "Another Critic namely Samber," *Festa Musicologica, Essays in Honor of George J. Buelow* (New York: Pendragon 1995).

¹²⁷ See Gibson, 227-8; Winton Dean, *Handel's Operas: 1726-1741* (Woorbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2007), 1-9; Donald Burrows, *Handel* (New York: Schirmer, 1994), 125-6.

¹²⁸ Gibson, 228.

¹²⁹ For example, on December 19, 1721, Thomas Dereham wrote to Giovanni Giacomo Zamboni: "I am sorry for the decay of operas, for if such performers have no luck, what can others expect?" Reprinted in

attendance began a more steady decline in the season of 1723-4, when a series of poorly-received performances forced three new operas to end their runs early.¹³⁰ During this season, Bononcini himself seems to have feigned illness to avoid conducting the third night of his *Farnace* due to “il mal successo della sua opera,”¹³¹ and several newspapers from the time mention heated disputes among the opera directors, a recurring problem that would persist until the Academy’s final season.¹³² Despite a handful of successes—most notably, Handel’s *Giulio Cesare* (1724) and *Rodelinda* (1725)—it is clear that by early 1726, still three months before the arrival of Faustina and a full two years before the fateful premiere of *The Beggar’s Opera*, Italian opera had lost much of its allure to Londoners.

An issue of the *Universal Mercury* suggested as much when, after an unusually well-attended revival of Handel’s *Ottone* in February 1726, it was reported that “Mr. Handel had the Satisfaction of seeing an Old Opera of his not only fill the House, which had not been done for a considerable time before, but People crowding so fast to it, that

Lowell Lindgren, ed. “Musicians and Librettists in the Correspondence of Gio. Giacomo Zamboni,” *RMA Research Chronicle* 24 (1991): 39.

¹³⁰ These were Bononcini’s *Farnace* (cancelled after six performances), and Ariosti’s *Vespasiano* (eight performances) and *Aquilio Consolo* (four performances).

¹³¹ Giovanni Giacomo Zamboni, Letter of December 6 to Giuseppe Riva. Quoted in Gibson, 198-9. A similar response was recorded by a diarist who, after attending Ariosti’s *Vespasiano*, remarked that it “did not please much.” See Konrad Sasse, “Opera Register from 1712 to 1734 (Colman-Register),” *Händel-Jahrbuch* 5 (1959): 215.

¹³² The *Weekly Journal* of January 18, 1724, described “a civil Broil arose among the Subscribers at the Practice of the new Opera of *Vespasian*, which turn’d all the Harmony into Discord,” adding that “if these Dissentions do not cease, it is thought Opera Stock would fall.” Deutsch, 157.

above 300 were turn'd away for want of room."¹³³ Clearly, such crowds were considered uncommon by this time, indicating that audiences had thinned well before the scandal that would strike London the following year.

Adding a further complication to the familiar narrative that the rival singers, and their subsequent ridicule in the *Beggar's Opera*, were solely responsible for the Royal Academy's demise is the fact that Italian opera witnessed a remarkable revival during its penultimate season, one stimulated by Faustina's arrival in the spring of 1726. That May, *Mist's Weekly Journal* printed a satirical letter from "Maria Impatience," who described the crowds at Faustina's premiere in Handel's *Alessandro* (1726):

Charming Faustina sang last Thursday, and I would not have fail'd the Opera for my next Birth-Day Gown, when, as if Fortune had a Mind utterly to disgrace me, (would you believe me?) I could not get in, though I had my Ticket in my Hand; the Fellow who opens the Door, had the Impudence to tell me, there was no Room, which I found true, to my great Disappointment, but went away in hopes to repair the loss on Saturday, ... but ... I met with no better Success.¹³⁴

She ends her letter with a request that the impresario, John Jacob Heidegger, "let us in at his convenient back Door, [for which] we should be infinitely obliged, since it will enable us to hear Faustina." Despite the clearly derisive intent behind the letter, much of the

¹³³ *Universal Mercury*, February 8, 1726, cited in *The London Stage: 1660-1800*, vol. 2, part 2, ed. Emmett L. Avery (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1960), 854.

¹³⁴ *Mist's Weekly Journal*, May 28, 1726. This document has not been reprinted in modern sources, to my knowledge.

author's report is substantiated by Lady Sarah Cowper, who described her own difficulties getting a ticket to *Alessandro* that month.¹³⁵

Perhaps the highest point of opera's popularity under the Royal Academy occurred in the spring of 1727, when Handel's *Admeto* ran for nineteen performances, in addition to the nine it received during its revival the following year. *Admeto*'s triumph was such that one source reported that "the House filled every night fuller than ever was known at any opera,"¹³⁶ and Robert Hassell, a regular operagoer who preferred many of Handel's earlier operas, readily admitted that *Admeto* "has been more followed and cried up than any of them."¹³⁷ *Admeto*'s long run, the longest and arguably the most successful of Handel's thirty-year opera career, hardly seems to indicate that the Royal Academy was in danger of collapse by January of 1727. Yet it was *Admeto* that first ignited the controversy over the rival sopranos, and it would eventually be *Admeto* that signaled the end of the Royal Academy, witnessing the company's final performance in June of 1728.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ "We go to the musick to night, but it must be the greatest of Secrets how we are admitted. Peter Webber has been with me to say ye Directors have consented to let four of us come in with Cuzzoni's name, but we must pretend to have been brought in by the Gentlemen of the Club, because Faustina has not had the same liberty." Lady Cowper to Mrs. Stephen Poyntz, May, 1726. Reprinted in Gibson, 235.

¹³⁶ Sasse, "Opera Register," quoted in Dean, *Handel's Operas: 1726-1741*, 50.

¹³⁷ Letter to Robert Cotesworth, April 27, 1726. Quoted in Gibson, 251.

¹³⁸ For a detailed discussion of Handel's *Admeto* and the rival sopranos, see Suzanne Aspden, "The 'Rival Queens' and the Play of Identity in Handel's *Admeto*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18:301-333 (2006). Also relevant is Wendy Heller, "The Beloved's Image: Handel's *Admeto* and the Statue of Alcestis," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 58: 559-638 (2005).

ROARS, CATCALLS, AND OTHER FUN: THE DIVAS SCANDAL OF 1727

How can we account for such vagaries in public taste? The sudden shifts in opera's popularity during the 1720s, which transformed overflowing houses into near-empty ones in a matter of months, seems to indicate that a great part of the London audience was not attending Italian opera out of a reverent passion for the art form. Indeed, Elizabeth Gibson believes that much of opera's success during the Royal Academy years can be attributed to its novelty in London, or to the recent arrival of a celebrated singer, rather than to a sustainable public interest in the genre. For example, Bononcini's extremely popular operas of the early 1720s were among the first Academy operas to feature the newly arrived Senesino.¹³⁹ Moreover, the rage over Handel's *Ottone* in 1723 and *Alessandro* in 1726, was undoubtedly due to the highly-publicized London premieres of Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni, respectively.

Nowhere is the importance of audience behavior more evident than in contemporary accounts of the divas scandal, which betray the often irreverent motives of British audiences. The controversy began on April 4, 1727, when growing animosity between supporters of Faustina on one hand, and Cuzzoni on the other, erupted into noisy demonstrations at a performance of Handel's *Admeto* while George I's granddaughter, Princess Amelia, was attending. Although such outbursts were not

¹³⁹ Bononcini's *Il Tronfo di Camilla* from Naples, 1696 was translated into English and produced at Drury Lane in 1706 and again at Lincoln's Inn Fields in 1716. See Lowell Lindgren, introduction to *Camilla*, Music for London Entertainment, series E, vol. 1 (London: Stainer & Bell, 1990).

unusual in early eighteenth-century London, they rarely occurred when a member of the Royal Family was present, and the insult on this occasion was sufficient to provoke the Countess of Pembroke to write a letter to the Princess of Wales expressing her apologies.¹⁴⁰

The following two months were fraught with more demonstrations and the conspicuous absences of both sopranos, resulting in a number of cancellations and four performances that appear to have taken place with neither Faustina nor Cuzzoni present.¹⁴¹ The controversy famously came to a head during a production of Bononcini's *Astianatte* on the 6th of June, 1727, when, in the presence of Princess Caroline, the noise grew so loud that the performance had to be stopped: the third act was skipped altogether and the opera concluded abruptly with its final chorus.¹⁴² This ended the opera season prematurely, and set into motion a tidal wave of satirical articles and pamphlets that appeared over that summer.¹⁴³ The following season opened with the thinnest audiences the Royal Academy had ever seen. By November, Handel's friend Mary Delany

¹⁴⁰ Letter to Mrs. Charlotte Clayton, reprinted in Deutsch, 206-7.

¹⁴¹ According to Winton Dean, two performances of *Ottone* and two of *Admeto* were given without a female lead. See Dean, *Three Ornamented Arias* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), ii.

¹⁴² See Zamboni's letter to Jacques Le Coq, in Lowell Lindgren, "Musicians and Librettists in the Correspondence of Gio. Giacomo Zamboni (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MSS Rawlinson Letters 116-138), *Research Chronicle of the Royal Musical Association* 24 (1991): 100, "They jumped from the end of the second act to the *coro*."

¹⁴³ Among these were *The Devil to Pay at St. James's: or a Full and True Account of a Most Horrid and Bloody Battle between Madam Faustina and Madam Cuzzoni... moreover, how Senesino has taken Snuff, and is going to leave the Opera, and Sing Psalms at Henley's Oratory* (London, 1727); and *The Contretemps, or The Rival Queens* (London, 1727).

predicted that the company “will not survive longer than this winter,”¹⁴⁴ a prediction all but guaranteed by the sensational premiere of *The Beggar’s Opera* two months later.

The following Spring, an ardent supporter of opera, writing to *The London Journal*, bitterly attributed opera’s short-lived success in London to disingenuous fans who had merely been following the current fashion. After lamenting the recent decline in opera attendance, the author cynically asks “whether that excessive Fondness for Italian Operas, which has of late Years over-run the Nation, has proceeded really from a true Taste of good Musick, or only from a violent Affectation of it.” Taking up a discussion of *The Beggar’s Opera* and the previous season’s scandal surrounding the rival divas, the anonymous author compares British opera audiences to Aesop’s cat, which, though transformed into a fine woman, was still unable to resist its natural inclination to chase every mouse it saw:

Our English Audience have been for some Time returning to their Cattish Nature; of which some particular Sounds of late from the Gallery have given us sufficient Warning. And since now They have so openly declared Themselves, I must only desire They will not think They can put on the fine Woman again, just when they please, but e’en content themselves with their Skill in Catterwauling. For my own Part, I cannot think it would be any Loss at all to such as are true Lovers of Musick, if all those false Friends, who have made Pretensions to it only in Compliance with the Fashion, wou’d separate Themselves from Them; provided

¹⁴⁴ Letter to Ann Granville, 25 November, 1727. Reprinted in Deutsch, 218.

our Italian Opera cou'd be brought under such Regulation as to go without 'em. We might then be able to sit and enjoy an Entertainment of this Sort free from those Noises and Disturbances which are so frequent in an English Audience, without any Regard, not only to the Performers, but even to the Presence of Majesty itself.¹⁴⁵

The reference to “Noises and Disturbances” in “the Presence of Majesty,” undoubtedly refers to the Faustina-Cuzzoni debacle. By “catterwauling,” moreover, the author alludes to the practice of catcalling—here, the actual blowing of loud whistles called cat-calls—presumably by those sitting in the upper gallery where the liveried servants customarily sat. Less clear, however, is the author’s request that “False Friends” in the audience stop feigning an interest in opera and, presumably, stop attending, so that true lovers of music might enjoy the performance without interruption. In order to compensate for their absence, he adds, some sort of “Regulation” should be arranged to allow operas to continue without their financial support.

Who were these “false friends”? Surely not the noisy footmen in the upper gallery, who had little reason to pretend to current fashion, and who, besides, were usually admitted free of charge while attending their masters. On one hand, the author seems to distinguish between “high” taste and “low” behavior, the first possessed by well-mannered elites who “truly” understood opera and the latter displayed by the rowdy masses who clearly had no appreciation at all. But as we have seen, audience disruptions

¹⁴⁵ *The London Journal*, March 23, 1728.

were not only extremely common in the eighteenth-century but came from all quarters of the house. The catcall, a small high-pitched tin or wooden whistle, had been a common theatergoing accessory for decades—Samuel Pepys wrote of buying one as early as 1660¹⁴⁶—and its use was by no means restricted to footmen in the gallery.¹⁴⁷ While the footmen, moreover, were certainly known for their unruly behavior—shouting, fighting, and occasionally throwing heavy objects into the pit below them (including oranges, glass bottles, and on at least one occasion, a man pushed from the balcony)¹⁴⁸—noblemen were also a common source of complaint because their rank enabled them to commit similar offenses without fear of reprimand. In the early decades of the eighteenth-century, stories of privileged ladies and gentlemen talking loudly, playing cards, shouting at the actors, and even physically interfering with the performance are legion.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ “I went to the Pope’s Head Alley and called on Adam Chard, and bought a catcall there, it cost me two groats.” *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, entry of Wednesday, March 9, 1659/60
<http://www.pepysdiary.com/archive/1660/03/07/> (accessed November 5, 2012).

¹⁴⁷ After a performance of Fletcher’s *The Humorous Lieutenant* in 1712, for example, one theatergoer described hearing a “great Consort of Catcalls” sounded by “many Persons of Quality of both Sexes.” The writer then jokingly asked, “whether it be a piece of Musick lately come from Italy.” Addison’s jocular response: “The Cat-call exerts it self to most advantage in the British Theatre: it very much Improves the Sound of Nonsense, and often goes along with the Voice of the Actor who pronounces it, as the Violin or Harpsichord accompanies the Italian Recitativo.” *The Spectator* No. 361, April 24, 1712.

¹⁴⁸ Leo Hughes, *The Drama’s Patrons*, 32-79. In February 1735, an argument between a footman and some royal guards at a performance of Porpora’s opera, *Polifemo*, escalated into a violent struggle and the footman’s eventual death. Notice of February 8, 1735, *Burney Collection of Theatrical Materials*, LBL 938.a - f.

¹⁴⁹ Several instances of disruptive behavior by members of the London nobility and gentry can be found in Hughes, *The Drama’s Patrons* and J.L. Styan, *Restoration Comedy in Performance* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Returning to our anonymous opera lover in *The London Journal*, then, it is telling that the author does not blame opera's demise on the spectators in the galleries alone. Rather, he describes a general decay in "British taste," irrespective of class categories, and offers the recent triumph of *The Beggar's Opera* as proof: an operatic satire that was enjoyed by both nobleman and common servant alike. Indeed, one of the most commonly voiced complaints about Gay's mock-opera was not that it contained bawdy characters and vulgar jokes, but that such vulgarity was attended and encouraged by some of the most respectable men and women in London. As another angry reviewer put it in almost exactly the same terms:

We are now sunk so intollerably low in respect of Taste, that Things at present draw an Audience of People of Fashion into our Theatres, which in the Days of our Fathers and Grandfathers, would have excited the Hisses of Servant-Maids and 'Prentices, at every Puppet-Show... *The Beggar's Opera*, and the loud Applause it receiv'd, is yet a nearer and a stronger Instance... of a Nation, who mistake keeping a String of Strumpets for Gallantry, and divert themselves for beholding the Debauches of a publick Robber.¹⁵⁰

Importantly, many of these "People of Fashion" were the very people who had supported Italian opera for nearly twenty years. John Gay's patroness and staunchest supporter, the Duchess of Queensbury, is a case in point. She personally helped finance *The Beggar's Opera*, allowed Gay to reside in her private home, and in 1729 lost her

¹⁵⁰ *The Universal Spectator, and Weekly Journal*, April 10, 1731. Reprinted in John Loftis, *Essays on the Theater from Eighteenth-Century Periodicals* (Los Angeles: Clark Memorial Library, 1960).

place at court for publicly defending Gay's *Polly*, the sequel to *The Beggar's Opera*. Nevertheless, the Duchess had been a longtime subscriber to the Italian opera, was included in the subscription list to Bononcini's cantatas published in 1721, and, most surprising of all, her husband, Charles Douglas, Third Duke of Queensbury, had been on the board of opera directors for the Royal Academy of Music for several years.¹⁵¹ This seems to corroborate the accusations made by our *London Journal* author: clearly many aristocrats who were once enthusiastic patrons of opera had by 1728 no qualms about paying to see it ridiculed.

The author's argument in *The London Journal* poses an interesting challenge, for following his line of reasoning, an important source of monetary support for Italian opera apparently came from a sector of the audience that was simultaneously the least interested and the most disruptive. Why would operagoers willingly pay to attend an entertainment they allegedly despised? Or, to put the question another way: in a culture that regarded theatergoing as a spectator sport, and often chose opera as its favorite adversary, to what extent might Italian opera's box-office success during the 1720s have depended upon those raucous spectators that took such delight in disrupting it?

A tentative answer is provided by two contrasting accounts of the diva scandal that appeared in London newspapers a few days after the infamous event. On June 10, 1727, the *British Journal* gave the following description of the performance (Figs. 5 & 6):

¹⁵¹ The Duke would also resign his royal appointments after quarrelling with George II about Gay's *Polly* in 1728. See Gibson, *The Royal Academy of Music*.

On Tuesday-night last, a great Disturbance happened at the Opera, occasioned by the Partizans of the Two Celebrated Rival Ladies, Cuzzoni and Faustina. The Contention at first was only carried on by Hissing on one Side, and Clapping on the other; but proceeded at length to Catcalls, and other great Indecencies: And notwithstanding the Princess Carolina was present, no Regards were of Force to restrain the Rudenesses of the Opponents.¹⁵²

Another report of the incident, printed in the *London Journal* on the very same day, is identically worded except for three significant changes:

On Tuesday-night last, a great Disturbance happened at the Opera, occasioned by the Partizans of the Two Celebrated Rival Ladies, Cuzzoni and Faustina. The Contention at first was only carried on by Hissing on one Side, and Clapping on the other; but proceeded at length to the Delightful exercise of Catcalls, and other Decencies, which demonstrated the inimitable Zeal and Politeness of that illustrious Assembly: And notwithstanding the Princess Carolina was present, no Regards were of Force to restrain the glorious Ardour of the Opponents.¹⁵³

¹⁵² *The British Journal*, June 10, 1727.

¹⁵³ *The London Journal*, June 10, 1727.

Figure 5) *The British Journal*, June 10, 1727

On Tuesday-night last, a great Disturbance happened at the Opera, occasioned by the Partizans of the Two Celebrated Rival Ladies, Cuzzoni and Faustina. The Contention at first was only carried on by Hissing on one Side, and Clapping on the other ; but proceeded at length to Catcalls, and other great Indecencies : And notwithstanding the Princess Carolina was present, no Regards were of Force to restrain the Rudenesses of the Opponents.

Figure 6) *The London Journal*, June 10, 1727

On Tuesday Night last, a great Disturbance happen'd at the Opera, occasion'd by the Partizans of the two celebrated Rival Ladies, *Cuzzoni* and *Faustina*. The Contention at first, was only carried on by Hissing, on one Side, and Clapping, on the other ; but proceeded, at length, to the delightful Exercise of Catcalls, and other Decencies, which demonstrated the inimitable Zeal and Politeness of that Illustrious Assembly. N. B. The Princess Carolina was present ; but no Regards were of Force to restrain the glorious Ardour of the fierce Opponents.

The altered report is obviously meant to mock the less-than-civil behavior demonstrated by some of the most distinguished people in London. But the second account also suggests a sense of playfulness and humor that hints at the motives of at least some of the audience members making the noise. In his study of eighteenth-century theater audiences, Leo Hughes has argued that theatergoers who arrived at a play bearing catcalls usually had every intention of using them that night. He cites Samuel Johnson, who in 1747 described cabals of young men who went to the theater for just this purpose: “It was the Fashion to condemn them all, right or wrong, without being heard; and ... Parties were made to go to new plays to make uproars, which they called by the odious name of ‘The Funn of the first Night.’”¹⁵⁴

Was Italian opera’s popularity during the 1720s in some way indebted to the audience members who came explicitly to have this sort of fun? The testimony of those who attended the opera during the Royal Academy years seems to support such a conclusion. For how else can we explain Monsieur de Fabrice’s letter to Count Flemming following the first performances of *Giulio Cesare*, which informs us:

The house was just as full at the seventh performance as at the first. In addition to that the squabbles between the Directors and the sides that everyone is taking between the singers and the composers, often provide the public with the most diverting scenes.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ See note 24.

¹⁵⁵ Letter dated March 10, 1724. Reprinted in Deutsch, 160.

Or how do we account for Lady Bristol's letter to her husband after the premiere of Handel's *Tamerlano* in 1724, when she wrote:

The new man takes extremely, but the woman [the contralto Anna Vincenza Dotti] is so great a joke that there was more laughing at her than at a farce, but her opinion of her self gets the better of that. The Royal Family were all there, and a greater crowd than ever I saw.¹⁵⁶

Suddenly Addison's complaint about opera's "irregularities" no longer seems to apply: to the irreverent spectators laughing in the crowd, opera's allure came precisely from its failure to achieve verisimilitude, a failure that was in many ways indebted to their own participation. For many theatergoers in eighteenth-century London, opera, unlike spoken drama, was closer to a theater of non-illusion, one that invited, and even encouraged disruption, incongruity, inconsistency, and laughter. Whether its generals gave commands in song, its oceans screeched loudly, or its roaring audiences were sometimes more interested in disrupting the action than they were in understanding it, Italian opera had always attracted audiences in part because it defied representation, and ignored the precepts of spoken drama. As one very early English defense of opera put it in 1688:

The Vices and Imperfections of a Comedy are the Virtues and Beauties of an Opera. Nothing is more lewd in a Comedy, than the slipping and alteration of the

¹⁵⁶ Letter to Lord Bristol, October 31, 1724. *Ibid.*, 174-5.

Scene; but nought is so fine and Excellent in an Opera, as the breaking of all the Unities of Time, Place, and Action.¹⁵⁷

In some ways, opera in Britain was beloved by many for precisely the reasons for which it was condemned: to paraphrase Richard Steele, opera required a “suspension of belief.” If this today seems like a bizarre reason to attend a serious opera, then perhaps we can learn to suspend our own belief once in a while, and even allow ourselves the occasional laugh.

¹⁵⁷ *Modern History or A Monethly [sic] Account of All Considerable Occurrences* (March, 1688).

CHAPTER 3

REFORMING HANDEL: THE FAILED HEROICS OF *IMENEO* (1740) AND *DEIDAMIA* (1741)

In July of 1740, the twenty-one year charter for the Royal Academy of Music officially expired, thus ending an institution that had only tenuously survived the company's first collapse twelve years earlier.¹⁵⁸ By this time, the Haymarket theater had stood empty for over a year, and a poorly-attended series of pasticcios, mounted at the Little Haymarket Theater by Lord Middlesex, failed to garner sufficient pledges for an opera subscription the following season.¹⁵⁹ In the summer of 1740 it would seem that, after more than a decade of crippling debts, fickle audiences, and heated competition, Italian opera had not only fallen out of favor in London, but had finally convinced its patrons that it was utterly incapable of making a profit. Yet, for reasons unknown, and facing some very grim financial prospects, Handel was by mid-July back on the European Continent planning an opera season for the coming year. Over the next few months, he would produce two new operas—*Imeneo* and *Deidamia*—his last, before finally abandoning the genre that had dominated his career for over thirty years.

Not surprisingly, Handel's final operatic venture was a failure. *Imeneo* received a meager two performances that fall, *Deidamia* just three in early 1741, and both operas

¹⁵⁸ The royal charter was issued on July 27, 1719, making 1740 the legal date the charter would have expired. However, since the Royal Academy's first performances were not given until April 2, 1720, it is conceivable that the charter can be considered to have lasted until April 1741.

¹⁵⁹ The pasticcios were *Diana ed Endimione* (Metastasio/Pescetti), *Olimpia in Ebuda* (Pescetti/Hasse), *Meride e Selinunte* (Pescetti, Vinci/Zeno), *Busiri, overo Trionfo d'Amore* (Rolli/Pescetti).

received mixed reviews, even from Handel's admirers. Anne Donellan wrote that those at the rehearsals of *Imeneo* thought the music "very pretty," and Thomas Harris greatly enjoyed the opera, but lamented that the first performance was not "met with the applause it deserves."¹⁶⁰ Charles Jennens, though granting that half of *Imeneo*'s songs were good, called it "the worst of all Handel's compositions," an opinion echoed by Charles Burney thirty years later.¹⁶¹ Jennens was kinder to *Deidamia*, deeming it "a fine opera," but worried that it might "be turn'd into farce by Miss Edwards, a little girl representing Achilles."¹⁶²

Such indifferent reactions from Handel's friends, despite their consensus about the high quality of his music, should give us pause. Indeed, Jennens's comment about *Deidamia* seems particularly strange, for never before in Handel's career had the decision to cast a male lead with a female soprano posed a substantial problem in London, particularly when that character was a young man: the role of Sesto in *Giulio Cesare* comes to mind, not to mention Arsamene (*Serse*), Radamisto (*Radamisto*), Goffredo (*Rinaldo*) and several of Handel's other male roles first performed by women. There was something different about these late works, something that made them susceptible to censure even while preserving their audience's appreciation for Handel's music.

The two operas have presented a problem for historians as well, not only because of the composer's somewhat inscrutable motives for writing them, but also because of

¹⁶⁰ Letter to Thomas Harris of November 22, 1740. Burrows and Dunhill, 108.

¹⁶¹ Letter to James Harris, December 29, 1740.. Ibid., 110. Burney, *A General History of Music: From the Earliest Ages to the Present*, IV (London: T. Becket, 1776).

¹⁶² Ibid.

their stark differences in tone from the traditional *dramma per musica*. *Imeneo*, for example, was billed as an “operetta” in London newspapers¹⁶³—perhaps in reference to its shorter duration and smaller performing forces—but modern critics have been quick to point out the opera’s comic qualities. Donald Burrows recently remarked that “*Imeneo*, in common with some of Handel’s other later operas, has features that suggest a rather ironic approach to the conventions of the Italian genre.”¹⁶⁴ Similarly, Winton Dean has spoken of *Deidamia*’s “compound of flippancy and serious emotion, its ‘off-beat’ flavour and the light, bantering tone of most of the dialogue.”¹⁶⁵ And Anthony Hicks, citing *Deidamia*’s “mock-heroic” arias and “detached manner,” has seen in Handel’s last opera “a deliberate attempt at a lighter style,” a style that Hicks suggests was especially attractive “to those unsympathetic to heroic opera seria.”¹⁶⁶ Modern scholarship seems to agree with Jennens on at least one account: that Handel’s late operatic works seem to have more in common with “farce” than with other operas of the time.

Yet the composition of Handel’s last two operas also coincides with another historical trend, one that has received a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years: the rise of Pietro Metastasio to preeminence on the eighteenth-century stage. Already having taken Italian theater by storm during the 1720s, Metastasio had by 1740 achieved

¹⁶³ *London Daily Post*, November 22, 1740. Two years later, when Handel revised *Imeneo* for Dublin, the work was advertised as a “serenata,” *Dublin Journal*, March 6, 1742.

¹⁶⁴ Burrows, notes to Handel, *Imeneo* (Classic Produktion Osnabrück: Georgsmarienhütte, 2004, compact disc).

¹⁶⁵ Dean, *Handel’s Operas, 1726-1741*, 474.

¹⁶⁶ Anthony Hicks, “Deidamia” in *Grove Music Online* <www.grovemusic.com> (accessed August 15, 2012).

unprecedented success as an opera librettist while court poet for the imperial theater of Vienna. During these early years an increasing number of Italian operas produced on the European Continent would be musical settings of Metastasio's libretti, a trend that would continue for several decades; over the course of the following century more than four hundred composers would provide music to texts by Metastasio.¹⁶⁷

Universally celebrated for their beautiful, elevated language, their respect for dramatic unities, and their rational, moralistic plots, Metastasio's "reform" librettos quickly came to represent a poetic ideal that surpassed and superseded the flawed dramas of earlier generations, including those of Handel's early career.¹⁶⁸ Over the following decades Metastasio's reputation as both a poet and a moralist would only increase. Although his works took longer to reach Britain, ten operas on Metastasian texts had already been presented in London by the time of *Imeneo*'s premiere, three of which were composed by Handel himself: *Siroe* (1728, arranged Nicola Haym), *Poro* (1731), and *Ezio* (1732).¹⁶⁹ In 1767, the complete works of Metastasio were finally translated into English; the translator, John Hoole, proudly boasted in his preface, "I shall esteem myself

¹⁶⁷ "Pietro Metastasio," in *Grove Music Online* <www.grovemusic.com> (accessed August 15, 2012).

¹⁶⁸ See Robert Freeman, *Opera Without Drama: Currents of Change in Italian Opera, 1675-1725* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1967); Martha Feldman, *Opera and Sovereignty: Transforming Myths in Eighteenth-Century Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 24; Francesco Cotticelli and Paologiovanni Maone, "Metastasio: The Dramaturgy of Eighteenth-Century Heroic Opera," in *The Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Opera*, ed. Anthony R. DelDonna and Pierpaolo Polzonetti (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 50-66.

¹⁶⁹ Other Metastasian operas performed in London during these years were *Adriano in Siria* (1735, libretto arr. Angelo Corri, music by Veracini), *Didone* (1737, music by Vinci, arr. Handel), *Siroe* (1736, Hasse), *Demeterio* (1736-37, Pescetti), *La Clemenza di Tito* (1737, libretto arr. Corri, music by Veracini), *Demofonte* (1737, Duni), *Angelica e Medoro* (1738, Pescetti), and *Diana ed Endimione* (1739, Pescetti).

happy to have once more contributed to the rational amusements of my country, by introducing an author, whose writings are not more eminent for elegant poetry, than [for their] refined morality.”¹⁷⁰

In this chapter, I would like to consider *Imeneo* and *Deidamia* at this interesting historical junction, when Handel’s decision to stop writing opera occurred just as the most celebrated Italian poet of the eighteenth-century had taken a firm hold in London. By considering what Handel’s late works share with these “rational” Metastasian reforms, and asking how their ironic qualities position these operas uniquely in relation to such reforms, I hope to provide some insight into the lukewarm reception that Handel’s last two operas received at their London premieres, and perhaps provide a glimpse of Handel’s own sense of the changing state of opera during this late part of his operatic career.

METASTASIO AT THE CROSSROADS

Metastasio’s *Achille in Sciro* (1736) was one of the most popular opera librettos of the eighteenth century, receiving no fewer than twenty-seven musical settings over a period of sixty years.¹⁷¹ It tells the story of Achilles, who, foretold to die in the Trojan War, is sent by his mother to the island of Skyros disguised as a girl. While living with the

¹⁷⁰ John Hoole, Preface to *The works of Metastasio; Translated from the Italian* (Davies, 1767).

¹⁷¹ The earliest settings were by Caldara (1736), Sarro (1737), Arena (1738), Chiarini (1739), and Leo (1740).

women at Lycomedes' court, Achilles falls in love with the king's daughter, Deidamia, who returns his love. But when the warrior Ulysses arrives in search of the young man, Achilles and Deidamia find it increasingly difficult to conceal his identity. Having devised a plan to expose the boy, Ulysses hides weapons within a chest of jewelry and presents them to the women at court. At the call to battle, Achilles, unable to hide his true nature, tears off his female attire, takes up a sword and is immediately enlisted for the war.

Metastasio's *Achilles* was not the first to be set to music. Several versions predated it, including Saccati's *La finta pazza* (1641, libretto by Giulio Strozzi), Legrenzi's *Achilla in Sciro* (1663, libretto by Ippolito Bentivoglio), and John Gay's ballad opera, *Achilles* (1733), the last of which would have probably been the only version Handel had known. In her provocative article, "Reforming Achilles: Gender, 'Opera Seria,' and the Rhetoric of the Enlightened Hero," Wendy Heller compares the Italian settings of this story and concludes that among them Metastasio's *Achilles* libretto represents an important transitional moment in the history of Italian opera.¹⁷² She discusses the writings of librettists and theorists who during the early decades of the eighteenth-century were intent on reforming the genre, and in their operas had begun to turn away from plots centered on love and romance—widely perceived as "feminine" concerns—and toward those that reinforced "masculine" virtues such as reason, honor, and civic responsibility. This reform movement, exemplified by the works of Metastasio

¹⁷² Wendy Heller, "Reforming Achilles: Gender, 'Opera Seria,' and the Rhetoric of the Enlightened Hero," *Early Music* 26 (1998): 562-581.

but foreseen by this earlier generation of Italian dramatic theorists, came to define what would come to be called “opera seria” only in the latter half of the eighteenth century.¹⁷³

Heller makes an interesting observation about the popularity of Metastasio’s *Achille* during these years, seeing the Italian reformers’ attempts to correct effeminate defects in opera to be physically enacted in the opera’s central scene when Achilles rejects his female garb. Achilles’ renunciation of his feminine identity in favor of the sword symbolically enacts Italian opera’s renunciation of effeminacy, and thus, in Heller’s words, “[Achilles] abandons the ambiguity of gender that was integral to the conventions of *seicento* opera (including his own operatic representations), and so becomes an eloquent proponent of the reform of Italian opera.”¹⁷⁴

Indeed, by mid-century, the perceived conflict between duty and love, or reason and emotion, had become a central preoccupation in the mid-century *dramma per musica*. Francesco Cotticelli and Paologiovanni Maione call this pervasive conflict in Metastasio’s dramas simply the “dilemma,” and have defined it as “the choice between one’s personal sacrifice [and] a state catastrophe.”¹⁷⁵ As Martha Feldman has argued persuasively, moreover, this dilemma was not only common to all mid-century reform opera but was an important part of maintaining and legitimizing entire social hierarchies in monarchical Italian states and principalities. As Feldman describes, in these operas “whatever the case, personal conflicts between duty and desire have to be resolved. Only thus can

¹⁷³ Reinhard Strohm, *Dramma per Musica: Italian Opera Seria of the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 1-2.

¹⁷⁴ Heller, 567.

¹⁷⁵ Cotticelli and Maione, “Metastasio,” 59.

negative feelings be conquered, negative social elements be expunged, and the social order be set aright.”¹⁷⁶ Works by Metastasio that feature this choice as a crucial aspect of their plot are almost too numerous to mention, but include, in addition to *Achille in Sciro*, *L’Olimpiade* (1733), *Adriano in Siria* (1732), *Didone abbandonata* (1724), *Temistocle* (1736), and perhaps the most literal example, *Alcide al bivio* (“Hercules at the Crossroads”) a one-act *festa teatrale* from 1760.

The myth of the Choice of Hercules, first recounted in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, tells the tale of a young Hercules presented with two possibilities for his future: a difficult life of toil and struggle which will lead to great honor and fame, represented by the figure of Virtue, and a passive, easy life of pleasure, personified by Love (these were called “Aretea” and “Edonide” in Metastasio’s version, respectively). Hercules, of course, chooses Virtue, and goes on to lead a glorious life of heroic pursuits: his decision thus represented a moral paradigm that could be followed by all citizens (and indeed all operatic heroes) in their own lives. Although the Choice of Hercules had been a common subject in European art and poetry since at least the Renaissance, receiving its most famous visual representation in Carracci’s *Ercole al Bivio* from 1595 (Fig. 7), there are several well-known examples from eighteenth-century painting, one of which, Paolo di Matteis’s *Choice of Hercules*, had been commissioned by the Third Earl of Shaftesbury in 1712 (Fig. 8).¹⁷⁷ The Hercules myth was also a popular subject in Britain, where Charles

¹⁷⁶ Feldman, *Opera and Sovereignty*, 24.

¹⁷⁷ It should be noted that Shaftesbury’s son, the future Fourth Earl of Shaftesbury, would eventually become a close friend of Handel and defender of his music in the late 1730s and 1740s. Other noteworthy eighteenth-century paintings of the Choice of Hercules are by Girolamo Batoni (1748), François Boucher

Addison published his own account of the story in 1709.¹⁷⁸ Later in life, Handel himself would provide a musical setting for a one-act English oratorio on the subject, *The Choice of Hercules*, in 1751.

(1750), and Benjamin West (1764). On the Matteis commission see J.E. Sweetman, "Shaftesbury's Last Commission," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 65 (1951): 110-116.

¹⁷⁸ *The Tatler*, November 22, 1709.

Figure 7) Annibale Carracci, *Ercole al Bivio* (1596)



Figure 8) Paolo di Matteis, *The Choice of Hercules* (1712)



The Hercules myth, like the story of Achilles, was not only an immensely popular topic for art and literature during this period, but also reflects some of the major preoccupations of mid-century opera reform, which tended to frame amorous love as something antithetical, or even inimical, to civic duty. This was one way in which Metastasio departed radically from his predecessors, such as the early Arcadian reformers Apostolo Zeno and Silvio Stampiglia. In the earlier libretti of Zeno, whom Robert Freeman has shown was long regarded as Metastasio's most important literary predecessor, true love was never a hindrance to duty, and a choice between the two was rarely necessary.¹⁷⁹ Rather, in the works of Zeno and his contemporaries, honor was a trait that was inevitably rewarded with love: true lovers deserved each other precisely because they were faithful to civil and familial causes.

The close pairing of love and virtue in earlier reform libretti of the eighteenth century could take many forms. Zeno's dramas, such as *Griselda* (1701), *Lucio Vero* (1702), and *Teuzzone* (1706) among many others, tended to conclude with a repentant tyrant who grants the mutual lovers his blessing in marriage in addition to restoring them as rightful heirs to the throne, thus restoring both the legitimacy of the state and the righteousness of true love. An illustrative example is Zeno's *Faramondo* (1698), in which Faramondo, sworn enemy of the Cimbrian king Gustavo, captures his rival in Act I but offers to let him return to his kingdom in peace. Gustavo refuses, still blaming Faramondo for killing his son Svenio in battle. Later in the opera, a disguised Faramondo saves Gustavo yet again, but when his identity is discovered, he is again rebuked and

¹⁷⁹ Freeman, *Opera Without Drama*, 55-91.

sentenced to death; Faramondo's beloved Rosimonda, Gustavo's daughter, offers her own life to defend his honor. Just as Gustavo is about to kill his enemy, he receives news that Svenio was not in fact his son; Faramondo is thus found innocent of his crimes and is given Rosimonda's hand as prize. In *Faramondo* both hero and heroine are as devoted to the state and to their own sense of honor as they are to their private identities, and are both ultimately rewarded with both love and virtue in the end. No sacrifice is made, and no choice is necessary. Love and duty are mutually assured, and equally desirable, both being extensions of the same moral order.

This earlier model of heroism, one bound to the necessity and inevitability of righteous love, becomes attenuated in the later operas of Metastasio, when love itself is presented as a force that can threaten, or even destroy, civic virtue. As Heller has shown, in works like *Achille in Sciro* (and indeed, *Alcide al bivio*), love was a weakness to be overcome, a stark difference from operas of a previous generation. Yet it was this early model of love and heroism to which Handel seems to have been attracted, as testified by his choice of increasingly older libretti as he reached the end of his operatic career. Handel set Zeno's *Faramondo* in 1738, a full thirty years after the libretto's original publication. The previous year, Handel's *Berenice* had featured a 1709 libretto by Antonio Salvi, and *Giustino* (1737), whose source libretto was first penned in 1711 by the Roman Pietro Pariati, was itself an adaptation of Nicolo Beregan's text from 1683. As we saw in the previous chapter, *Serse*, the oldest libretto Handel ever set, was an adaptation of Stampiglia's 1694 text, itself modeled on Minato's 1654 version of Cavalli fame. Why Handel would continue to choose older and older libretti just as Metastasio's fame had

reached its apogee is a question that musicologists have yet to address, and the answer may lie in two works that, on the surface, share very little with the operas of Handel's earlier career: *Imeneo* and *Deidamia*.

LOVE AND VIRTUE AT WAR

Considering Handel's increasing fondness for older librettos, along with the general consensus among musicologists about the lighter tone of his late operas, it is surprising that *Imeneo* and *Deidamia* seem at first glance to conform closely to these mid-century trends toward reform. Although neither opera features a libretto by Metastasio—*Deidamia* was written by Handel's longtime collaborator, Paolo Rolli, and *Imeneo* was adapted from a 1723 text by Stampiglia—both works clearly reflect the values that were important to mid-century reforms. The two operas are unique in Handel's *oeuvre* in that neither ends with a reconciliation between the young lovers. In *Imeneo*, Rosmene, having been rescued aboard a ship overtaken by pirates, rejects her betrothed, Tirinto, out of obligation to Imeneo, the man who saved her life. In *Deidamia*, also centered around the Achilles myth, the heroine is forced to sacrifice her personal feelings to fulfill Achilles's patriotic duty: he leaves her to fight in the Trojan War, knowing that death awaits him there.

Both operas, moreover, frame their conclusions as rational, necessary outcomes that best serve the public good. At the end of *Deidamia*, Ulysses explains, "Domestic

life must be sacrificed to the greater end of heroic deeds” (“Verso al gran fine dell’eroiche geste, rompansi le dimore”). As we are told in the final chorus of *Imeneo*:

Se consulta il suo dover	If it seeks to fulfill its duty
nobil’alma, o nobil cor,	the noble soul, or noble heart,
non mai piega a’ suoi voler;	will not bow down to its desire
ma ragion seguendo va.	but will follow reason.

In this way, Handel’s final two operas faithfully reproduce the Metastasian paradigm: love is rejected to fulfill public duty, feelings are suppressed in favor of reason, and personal sacrifice is deemed preferable to public harm. On one level there is absolutely nothing comic about these operas at all.

Yet in other important ways Handel’s heroes hardly resemble the masculine figures of reform opera. For one thing, both *Imeneo* and *Achilles* are almost insignificant roles. In *Imeneo*, Handel gave his leading castrato, Giovanni Battista Andreoni, the part of Tirinto, Rosmene’s rejected suitor, rather than that of the hero *Imeneo*, which he gave to William Savage, a bass. In so doing, Handel cut *Imeneo*’s arias to only two in number (compared to Tirinto’s six), making the opera’s title character the least important vocal role of the entire work.¹⁸⁰ In *Deidamia*, Achilles suffers a similar fate: having assigned Andreoni the role of Ulysses, Handel left Achilles to a certain Miss Edwards, the “little girl” described by Jennens. Consequently, her five very short arias pale in comparison to the six grand numbers given to the *primo uomo*. If Handel’s librettists felt obliged to

¹⁸⁰ *Imeneo* is also Handel’s only opera whose title character is a bass role.

sacrifice pleasure to duty, Handel himself certainly didn't feel it necessary to sacrifice his listeners' pleasure to the rules of operatic convention.

Beyond the vocal prominence of the respective roles, Handel's musical characterization of his two heroes is also unusual, if not outright bizarre. Imeneo's arias seem to align him more closely with one of Handel's lecherous generals than with any of Metastasio's enlightened heroes. In his less-than-subtle first aria, "Esser mia dovrà la bella tortorella" ("The beautiful turtledove must be mine"), Imeneo is concerned only with winning Rosmene, even if he does so against her will: comparing Rosmene to a lovely bird, the insinuation is that he longs for the day when she is finally caged. His second and final aria, "Chi scherza con le rose," does even less to endear him to the audience. Describing Rosmene as a rose that inevitably pricks the man who holds it, Imeneo's sexualized, chauvinistic sentiments seem a far cry from those of a noble faithful *primo uomo* (Ex. 3.1):

Chi scherza con le rose	He who plays with roses
un di si pungerà.	will one day prick himself.
Farfalle che amorose	Butterflies who, in love
girate intorno al lume	flutter around the flame,
fuggite, che le piume	flee, for the flames
alfin vi abbucierà.	will eventually burn you.

Example 3.1) *Imeneo*, Act II, Scene 5, Aria. “Chi scherza colle rose” (Imeneo)

16. Aria
Allegro

5 IMENEO

1. Chi scher-za col-le ro-se un
Wer spie-let mit den Ro-sen, der

8

1. di si pun-ge - rà, un di si pun-ge - rà
sticht sich ir-gend-wann, der sticht sich ir-gend-wann

11

1. chi scher-za col-le ro-se un di si pun-ge - rà,
wer spie-let mit den Ro-sen, der sticht sich ir - gend-wann,

14

1. si pun-ge - rà, si pun-ge - rà; chi
ja, ir - gend-wann, ja, ir - gend-wann; wer

BA 4072a

18

I. *tr*

schèr-za col-le ro-se un dī si pun-ge - rà
 spie-let mit den Ro-sen, der sticht sich ir-gend-wann

21

I. *tr*

un dī si pun-ge - rà, chi schèr-za col - le ro-se, chi
 der sticht sich ir - gend-wann, wer spie - let mit den Ro-sen, wer

24

I. *tr*

schèr - za col - le ro-se un dī si pun-ge - rà, chi schèr-za, chi schèr-za, chi
 spie - let mit den Ro-sen, der sticht sich ir-gend-wann, wer spie-let, wer spie-let, wer

27

I. *tr*

schèr-za col - le ro - se un dī si pun-ge - rà, si pun-ge - rà, si pun-ge - rà, un
 spie - let mit den Ro - sen, der sticht sich ir-gend-wann, ja, ir-gend-wann, ja, ir-gend-wann, der

30

(parte, ma vedendo Rosmene, si arresta)
 (geht ab, als er aber Rosmene sieht, bleibt er stehen)

I. *tr*

dī si pun-ge - rà.^[95]
 sticht sich ir - gend-wann.

f

It is hard to hear a hero in this music. Imeneo's ungainly bass coloratura, awkward vocal leaps, and excessive cadential repetitions (mm. 13-14, 23-24, 28-29), replete with clumsy trills (mm. 20-21), strongly suggest the figure of an amorous buffoon. Moreover, the stark orchestral doublings, though common enough in Handel's arias for bass, seem particularly slavish here, not only because of Handel's decision to double the vocal line in octaves, but also because of the aria's complete absence of harmonic filler. Apart from the respite provided by the brief ritornelli, Imeneo's character is musically one-dimensional, a melody and nothing more.

Compare this to the castrato Tirinto's Act I aria, "Se potessero i sospir miei," when the pining lover awaits his betrothed's return. Fully twice as long as Imeneo's aria, Tirinto's graceful music bears no resemblance to the plodding, clumsy octaves that characterize Imeneo. And, unlike the title hero's more prurient interests, Tirinto the steadfast lover is focused solely on his own suffering (Ex. 3.2):

Se potessero i sospir miei	If only my sighs could make
far; che l'onde / a queste sponde	the waves / of this shore
ritornasso il legno infido	bring back the faithless ship
lo vorrei tutti sciogliere là sul lido	I would spill there on the beach
i sospiri del mio cor.	all the sighs of my heart.

Example 3.2) *Imeneo*, Act I, Scene 1, Aria. “Se potessero i sospir miei” (Tirinto)

2. Aria
Larghetto

3 TIRINTO

Se po-tes-se-ro i so-spir
Wenn die Seuf-zer es doch ver-

6 mie - i far che l'on - de a que - ste spon - de ri-por-
- möch - ten, dass die Wel - len in die Hei - mat das ver-

8 - tas - se-ro il le - gno in-fi - do, io vor - rei tut - ti scio - -
- lo - re - ne Schiff - lein führ - ten, woll - te ich mei - ne Seuf - -

*) S. HHA, Critical Report, S./p. 284.

The orchestra's lush, four-part harmonies, graceful thirty-second note flourishes, and independent contrapuntal lines are complemented nicely by Tirinto's sustained, lyrical vocal line. There is not the smallest hint of irony or awkwardness here—even on the coloratura runs (mm. 9, 11-12), no orchestral doublings can be found. Tirinto's voice carries the entire burden of his melody and the orchestra fleshes out fully his tortured emotional state.

Another clue that Handel is depicting his title role ironically can be found in the celebratory chorus that punctuates the opera's first act: "Vien' Imeneo fra voi." This chorus first appears toward the beginning of Act I, celebrating the arrival of the hero immediately before Imeneo makes his first entrance. It returns twice, eventually closing the act, and thus serves as a kind of refrain throughout the act. The text of the chorus is notable in that it is the opera's only passage that makes an explicit connection between Imeneo and his namesake, Hymen, the Greek god of marriage. The chorus sings:

Vien' Imeno fra voi, sperate amanti	Hymen comes for you, hopeful lovers,
e vien con esso amor, godete o cori.	and with him comes love: enjoy, o hearts!

As John Roberts has pointed out, the music to this chorus was borrowed from one of Handel's early duets, "Che vai pensando," though here Handel's treatment of the principal melody is very different.¹⁸¹ The chorus's opening motto, first played in the orchestra before being repeated by the choral voices, is an antecedent phrase that outlines the tonic triad and ends with a very weak imperfect cadence: a $\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ cadential motion in the

¹⁸¹ John Roberts, "The Story of Handel's *Imeneo*," *Händel-Jahrbuch* 47 (2001): 337-384.

bass with a soprano line ending on scale degree $\hat{3}$ (Ex. 3.3). Nothing strikes the listener as unusual about this opening antecedent phrase until the end of the number, when this opening gesture is repeated three times (Ex. 3b, mm. 74-76), each time setting up the same antecedent phrase for a stronger tonic resolution. After two statements by the chorus (mm. 73-76, 77-80), who then complete the period with two conclusive cadential phrases, “sperate o amanti” and “godete o cori” (mm. 82-85), the orchestra, in a wry moment of musical humor, repeats the inconclusive opening motto to close the act, ending with the same weak cadence as before (Ex. 3.4, mm. 85-88).

Example 3.3) *Imeneo*, Act I Chorus. “Vien’Imeneo fra voi” (opening)

The musical score is for the opening of the chorus "Vien'Imeneo fra voi" from the opera *Imeneo*, Act I. It features four vocal parts: Soprano, Contralto, Tenore, and Basso, along with a piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are in Italian and German.

Vocal Parts:

- Soprano:** Vien I - me-neo fra voi, vie - ne fra voi,
- Contralto:** Zu uns kommt I - me - neo, er kommt zu uns,
- Tenore:** Vien I - me-neo fra voi, vie - ne fra voi,
- Basso:** Zu uns kommt I - me - neo, er kommt zu uns,

Piano Accompaniment: The piano part provides a harmonic foundation for the vocalists, featuring a mix of chords and moving lines in both the right and left hands.

Example 3.4) *Imeneo*, Act I Chorus. “Vien’Imeneo fra voi” (conclusion)

69

- de - te, a - man - ti, spe - ra - - - - te, vien I - me - neo fra
 freu - en, euch freu - en, und hof - - - - fen, zu uns kommt I - me -

- de - te, a - man - ti, a - man - ti, go - de - te, spe - ra - te, vien I - me - neo fra
 freu - en, euch freu - en, euch freu - en, euch freu - en und hof - fen, zu uns kommt I - me -

- de - te, a - man - ti, a - man - ti, go - de - te, spe - ra - te, vien I - me - neo fra
 freu - en, euch freu - en, euch freu - en, euch freu - en und hof - fen, zu uns kommt I - me -

- - - - - te, a - man - ti, go - de - te, spe - ra - te, vien I - me - neo fra
 - - - - - der hof - fen, euch freu - en und hof - fen, zu uns kommt I - me -

75

voi —, vie - ne fra voi, e vien con es - so A - mor —, vie - ne A - mor, spe-
 - neo —, er kommt zu uns, und A - mor kommt mit ihm —, er kommt mit ihm, ihr

voi —, vie - ne fra voi, e vien con es - so A - mor —, vie - ne A - mor, spe-
 - neo —, er kommt zu uns, und A - mor kommt mit ihm —, kommt mit ihm, ihr

voi —, vie - ne fra voi, e vien con es - so A - mor —, vie - ne A - mor, spe-
 - neo —, er kommt zu uns, und A - mor kommt mit ihm —, kommt mit ihm, ihr

voi —, vie - ne fra voi, e vien con es - so A - mor —, vie - ne A - mor, spe-
 - neo —, er kommt zu uns, und A - mor kommt mit ihm —, kommt mit ihm, ihr

82

- ra - te, o a - man - ti, go - de - te, o co - ri.
 dürft jetzt hof - fen, ihr dürft euch freu - en.

- ra - te, o a - man - ti, go - de - te, o co - ri.
 dürft jetzt hof - fen, ihr dürft euch freu - en.

- ra - te, o a - man - ti, go - de - te, o co - ri.
 dürft jetzt hof - fen, ihr dürft euch freu - en.

- ra - te, o a - man - ti, go - de - te, o co - ri.
 dürft jetzt hof - fen, ihr dürft euch freu - en.

Fine dell'Atto primo
Ende des ersten Aktes

BA 4072a

Now accustomed to hearing this passage as an antecedent, incomplete phrase, the effect of the imperfect ending is striking, akin to a question mark, and may remind listeners of the last bars of Haydn's "Joke" Quartet: we in the audience are left wondering if the act is really over. Not only does the inconclusive ending seem to undermine the celebratory message of the chorus, but suggests that Imeneo's arrival may not be as happy an occasion as the chorus suggests. Indeed, we may wonder whether this opera will end happily at all.

A similar kind of irony pervades Handel's treatment of Achilles in *Deidamia*, who does not conform to the model of Metastasio reform hero any more than Imeneo did. It will first be useful, however, to consider Metastasio's portrayal of the young Achilles as a point of comparison. In his article on the castrato and baroque perceptions of male beauty, Roger Freitas has remarked that contrary to Heller's claims about the hypermasculine Achilles in *Achille in Sciro*, Achilles does not actually renounce his affection for Deidamia, or his susceptibility to love, once he has rejected his female clothing; indeed, Achilles's crucial "choice of Hercules"—his decision to follow his desires or his duty—remains a major preoccupation of Metastasio's third act.¹⁸² I would argue, however, that even if he retains some of his amatory character, Metstasio's "reformed" Achilles still exhibits some highly masculinized qualities that have no corollary in Handel's hero.

¹⁸² Roger Freitas, "The Eroticism of Emasculation: Confronting the Baroque Body of the Castrato," *Journal of Musicology* 20 (2003): 196-249.

In the first scene of Metastasio's *Achille in Sciro*, for example, a ship appears on the horizon, and, fearing Trojan pirates, the assembled company flees the stage. Achilles, undaunted, remains behind, looking longingly at the ships and wondering if warriors are on board. Upon the arrival of his tutor, Nearco, Achilles makes a bitter remark about his feminine clothing: "I am sick of being seen in this cowardly skirt." ("Io son già stanco di più vedermi in questa gonna imbelle.")¹⁸³ Throughout Metastasio's text, however, Achilles's increasing concern over his female attire becomes a near obsession: over the course of the opera he mentions his shameful clothing no fewer than six times, variously calling it "misere spoglie" ("miserable dress") or "impacci femminili" ("feminine constraints"). He is also frustrated by his amorous feelings toward Deidamia, which often force him to act against his male instinct: the words "amor tiranno" or "tirannia d'amore" become something of a refrain throughout the text.

In Rolli's libretto for Handel's *Deidamia*, however, none of these gendered anxieties seem to apply. Unlike Metastasio's anxious, guilty protagonist, Handel and Rolli's Achilles is impetuous, irrationally jealous, and at best apathetic toward war and glory. He seems to genuinely enjoy his life in Skyros, spending most of his days running in the woods, blissfully eschewing his duty to his country while seeming almost indifferent to the concerns of Deidamia or the difficulties of his own situation. In fact, throughout Handel's opera Achilles fails to mention his female clothing even once, and does not seem to be burdened by the pressures of love; for much of the opera he speaks of nothing but hunting.

¹⁸³ Hoole's 1767 translation reads, "I am weary of disguise, this sex's weeds of sloth inglorious."

The difference between the two portrayals becomes particularly evident in the way each librettist treats Achilles' relationship to the warrior Ulysses. In Metastasio's version, Achilles responds to the older man with utmost reverence and awe; in fact, during the central gift scene, Metastasio's Achilles can't stop staring at Ulysses with his "martial gaze," a constant source of worry for Deidamia, who fears it will expose her lover's true identity. Rolli's Achilles, however, treats Ulysses with almost juvenile contempt, and at times, irreverent mockery. During their longest scene together, Act II, Scene 8 of Handel's *Deidamia*, Ulysses attempts to uncover Achilles's disguise by pretending to flirt with the young man, thinking it will shake his resolve. Achilles, however, in a moment of almost pure comedy, does what both Ulysses and most eighteenth-century dramatists would have considered unthinkable. He flirts back:

<i>Achilles</i>	Dimmi, potrei saper chi più fra noi par bella agli occhi tuoi?	Tell me, if you can who among us is most pleasing to your eyes?
<i>Ulysses</i>	Quella tu sei.	You know who it is.
<i>Achilles</i>	Parve a tutte però che Deidamia pria t'accendesse il sen.	It seems to all of us that Deidamia fired your breast most of all.
<i>Ulysses</i>	Te vista ancora io non avea. D'amor nemica è quella: tu no 'l sei forse, e forse ancor più bella.	I had still not seen you. She is an enemy of love, you surely are not, and are still more beautiful.
<i>Achilles</i>	Valoroso e sagace, apposto in parte tu sei. Non son nemica io degli amanti, ma nemica d'amor: n'amo il corteggio, ma impero sul mio cor mai non avranno.	Valorous and wise, you can play the part. I am not an enemy to lovers, but an enemy to love. I only love courtship, but it will never have the power to move me.

	Spergiuri ed infedeli, vantan fede ed affetto sol per conquista del presente oggetto. Ma perdo il mio piacer.	Lies and infidelity serve loyalty and affection, only to conquer the present object. But I am losing my pleasure...
<i>Ulysses</i>	Deh, più dimora: spirto maggior del femminil costume scorgo in te...	Ah, but stay awhile more. I sense more than your feminine clothing in you...
<i>Achilles</i>	Scaltro sei: ben conoscesti ch'amo la lode, e lusingar mi sai.	You are cunning: you know well that I love praise, and you know how to flatter.
<i>Ulysses</i>	Ma più amar ben poss'io Deh, vezzoso idol mio, mia fè, mia destra accogli. Amor disciolta lasciar non può tanta beltà. Tu ridi?	But I can still hope to love. Ah, my beautiful idol. Receive my pledge, my hand. Such a beauty as you could not reject my love. You laugh?
<i>Achilles</i>	Rido di te: Deidamia ascolta.	I'm laughing at you: Deidamia is listening.

Here we see physical laughter actually written into the opera text, an incredibly rare occurrence in eighteenth-century *dramma per musica*, and one that betrays Rolli's true intentions in this scene. For although Ulysses is ostensibly trying to uncover the manly nature of the young hero, he instead uncovers his genuine vanity and mild amusement at his own ridiculous situation. One of the moral imperatives of the early reformers is thus undermined, turning what could have been a lesson about the immanence of male heroism into a coarse scene of comic burlesque.

THE PRICE OF REFORM: “SERIOUS OPERA”

None of this is to say that Handel’s final operas have no serious moments: both *Imeneo* and *Deidamia* include superb scenes of tragic drama. Such scenes are reserved, however, not for the male heroes but for the leading women, who in both operas are forced to suppress their own desires to accommodate the heroic prerogatives of men. *Imeneo* concludes with a long mad scene for Rosmene, who has yet to make her own “choice of Hercules”: marry Tirinto, the man she loves, or give herself over to the hero who saved her life. In a delirium, Rosmene relates her vivid hallucinations and even seems close to death. As she slips from recitative to accompagnato to arioso to full aria, the men surrounding her look on in horror, thinking she has gone mad. Rosmene finally awakens, and much to Tirinto’s dismay, chooses to wed Imeneo. Her reason: “fui costretta a dir di sì.” (“I was forced to say yes.”).

Rosmene’s music is typical for Handel’s mad scenes, drawing upon a long tradition of musical depictions of madness going back to the seventeenth-century.¹⁸⁴ Of course, one of the earliest and most influential depictions of operatic madness was the famous scene for Deidamia in Strozzi and Saccati’s *La finta pazza* (1641), which shares many similarities with Handel’s setting: dissonant, tortured sections of recitative alternating variously with light, triple meter dances and arias in minor modes, all of which combine to create a formal incoherence meant to reflect Rosmene’s unstable state of

¹⁸⁴ On the seventeenth-century convention of the mad scene, see Ellen Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice: The Creation of a Genre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 346-360.

mind.¹⁸⁵ Beyond the conventional aspects of this scene, however—similar musical devices appear, for example, in Handel’s mad scenes from *Orlando* and *Alcina*—certain aspects of Rosmene’s monologue seem to resonate with older models of operatic heroism, in direct opposition to the Metastasian paradigm, and may reveal a hidden agenda behind Handel’s musical setting.

The first clue to such an agenda lies in Handel’s use of borrowing. At the end of the first recitativo accompagnato, Handel inserts an unusual chromatic passage into Rosmene’s mad scene, just as she experiences a vision of the mythological king Rhadamanthus, judge of the dead (Ex. 3.5):

<i>Rosmene</i>	Che arriva cinta di negro manto	He comes, surrounded by a black mantle
	A passo lento e piano,	Walking slowly and quietly,
	Col brando in pugno	With sword in hand,
	E la bilancio in mano.	And the scales in hand.
	Essa per me decida.	It is for me to decide.
	Ascolta! Esser io deggio o ingrata	Listen! Am I to be ungrateful or unfaithful? ...
	Ombra, decidi! Ahi!	Shades, decide! Ah!
	Che mancar mi sento.	My senses fade away.
	Caliginoso intorno mi sembra	The day seems foggy,
	Il giorno e l’anima già sviene.	and my spirit faints,
	Chi di voi, per pietà, chi mi sostiene?	Who among you, in pity, will support me?

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Example 3.5) *Imeneo*, Act III, Scene 8. Accompagnato. “Miratela che arriva” (Rosmene)

23

R. *- vi-se dal mio co-re il mio cor: l'om - bra de - ci - se. Ahi_*
e-wig mir das Herz aus der Brust: sie _____ hat ent-schie-den. Ach_

27

R. *—! che man-car mi sen-to! Ca - li - gi-no-so in-tor - no*
—! ich ver-geh, ich fühl es! Wie furcht-bar und wie dun - kel

30

R. *mi sem - bra il gior-no, e l'a - ni - ma già svie-ne:*
er-scheint der Tag mir, es schwin - den mir die Sin-ne:

33

R. *chi di voi, per pie - tà, chi mi so - stie-ne?*
Wer von euch steht mir bei, wer will mir hel - fen?

(S'abbandona sostenuta da Tirinto e da Imeneo.)
 (Sie sinkt nieder und wird von Tirinto und Imeneo aufgefangen.)

Example 3.6) *Tamerlano*, Act III, Scene 9, Accompagnato (Bajazet)

Piano, e lento. 127

Bajazet. *Lento.*
Sì, fi-glia, io mo-ro; ad-di-o! tu re-sti... ahi-mè, che

dir non pos-so in pa-ce! tu re-sti, fi-glia, ne-gli af-fan-ni, e que-sto è'l

Asteria.
so-lo af-fan-no mi-o. No, vo'-se-guir-ti an-chi i-o, io vo'-mo-rir; prence, ti-ran-no, un

In this passage, Rosmene's jarring enharmonic modulations, moving stepwise chromatically from F# major through F minor to E minor (Ex. 4, mm. 28-35), draw heavily from music of the final scene of Handel's *Tamerlano* (1719), when Asteria's father, Bajazet, unable to bear the sight of his daughter in chains, poisons himself and dies onstage (Ex. 3.6, mm. 1-12).¹⁸⁶ Not only do both scenes contain the same harmonic progression and a similar melodic contour, but both are in the same key. In both operas, moreover, the passage is chilling, and like many of Handel's *accompagnato* movements, carry a far heavier emotional burden than any aria could.

Handel's choice of operas is telling: *Tamerlano* was perhaps the closest Handel ever came to writing true tragic opera, and it was his only work to depict a suicide onstage. Even though the plot resolves itself happily, moreover, scholars have long noted how the opera's haunting minor-mode concluding chorus casts a dark shadow over the forced *lieto fine*, when Tamerlano suddenly grants Asteria her freedom again.¹⁸⁷ For Handel to quote directly from such a unique, memorable scene in one of his more popular operas gives us perhaps the most direct evidence we have that Handel did not intend Rosmene's union to Imeneo to be seen as an happy one. Indeed, it is difficult to believe that *Imeneo* was originally intended for a royal wedding, and seems to turn the notion of the Metastasian "dilemma" on its head: the choice between love and duty, one

¹⁸⁶ See Dean, *Handel's Operas 1726-1741*, 452.

¹⁸⁷ Winton Dean and J. Merrill Knapp, *Handel's Operas, 1704-1726* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 553.

necessarily negative and the other positive, is not as simple as the reformers might have us believe.¹⁸⁸

Deidamia's compromise is no less troubling, and again her treatment in Handel's opera is thrown into stark relief when compared to Metastasio's version. In *Achille in Sciro*, Metastasio places Achilles' discovery scene in a prominent dramatic position at the very end of Act II, making it the crucial turning point of the story. Just before he reveals his identity, Achilles is asked to sing for the men, which he willingly does, skillfully accompanying himself on the lyre. But upon finding the hidden sword and rushing to aid the men in battle, Achilles does something startling: throwing down his lyre, Achilles bitterly utters, "Vile instrument" ("Vile stromento"), and finding renewed strength, seizes the sword and declares: "I begin now to recognize myself."¹⁸⁹ In one swift gesture, then, Achilles renounces both effeminacy and music at the same time, two things that, as we have seen, were commonly paired (and denounced) in operatic criticism at the time.¹⁹⁰ Achilles' decision to go to war is here framed as an embrace of loyalty, honor, and pride and an affirmation of civic duty and masculine virtue; his act of bravery leads to the opera's unambiguously optimistic moral end. By framing the story around the young hero's public obligations, Metastasio downplays Deidamia's grief, and even seems to wipe it away with Achilles' promises of marriage; Deidamia gladly accepts, and

¹⁸⁸ For more about the background and composition of *Imeneo*, see Roberts, "The Story of Handel's *Imeneo*."

¹⁸⁹ "A rincomincio adesso/A ravvisar me stesso."

¹⁹⁰ See Heller's discussion of this scene, "Reforming Achilles," 567.

the opera ends on a genuinely happy note. Glory, Love, and Time sing praises to the blissful couple as Achilles goes off to war.

Handel and Rolli, however, handle the story very differently. First of all, their opera is entitled *Deidamia*, which immediately offsets any emphasis they may have given to Achilles' assertion of public virtue, instead shifting our attention to Deidamia's response. We are already given a sense of this in the last scene of *Deidamia*'s second act, which occupies the same structural position as Metastasio's discovery scene, but is very different in content and tone: Achilles, dressed as Pirra, has incensed Deidamia by carelessly jeopardizing his secret identity while out on a hunt. After she leaves him in disgust, Achilles sings, "Yes, I am satisfied by the little hills/more than by endless lovers... I despise love; I much prefer to follow the fleet footsteps of the timid deer." Although Achilles is ostensibly singing as Pirra here (by "lovers" he seems to mean male suitors, not Deidamia), it leaves the sincerity of his affections rather suspect in the offhanded way he touts his opinions about love.

This suspicion is confirmed in the discovery scene, which in Rolli's libretto appears inconspicuously in Act III, Scene 2, five scenes before the opera's end. As Deidamia looks on in horror, Achilles first seizes the sword from among the gifts and then sings a light, frivolous aria about his future posterity and the glory of Greece, before, as the convention dictates, exiting immediately, leaving Deidamia behind without a word. Now we arrive at the true dramatic climax of Handel's final opera: Deidamia's lament (Ex. 3.7). Left alone with Ulysses, the forlorn heroine's words are utterly desperate. Set in G

minor, with a bass line that, appropriately, outlines a characteristic descending tetrachord

G–Eb–D, Deidamia sings:

M'ai resa infelice;

You have left me wretched;

che vanto n'avrai?

how can you boast of it?

Oppressi, dirai, un alma fedel.

You've oppressed a faithful heart.

Example 3.7) *Deidamia*, Act III, Scene 2, Aria. “M’ai resa infelice” (Deidamia)

Largo

DEIDAMIA

M’hai re - sa in - fe - li - ce; che
 Du brach - test mir Un - heil; was

5

D. van - to n’a - vrai? che van - to n’a - vrai?
 hast du da - von? was hast du da - von?

11

D. M’hai re - sa in - fe - li - ce; che van - to n’a - vrai?
 Du brach - test mir Un - heil; was hast du da - von?

Example 3.8) *Deidamia*, Act III, Scene 2, cont. (B section)

31 **allegro**

D.

34

D.

37

D.

40

D.

5 6 64

Characterized by jarring major seventh suspensions and a series of evaded cadences—leaving us without a single tonic cadence for the opening 29 bars—the A section suddenly gives way to a violent second section as Deidamia utters her curse (Ex. 3.8):

Le vele se dirai	If you say you will raise your sails
de' flutti al seno infido,	on the waves of an unfaithful heart
sconvolga orribil vento	then let horrible winds unleash
l'istabil elemento	the volatile elements
E innanzi al patrio lido	and as you reach your shore
sommergati, crudel.	may you drown, cruel one.

Like Rosmene's mad scene in *Imeneo*, Deidamia's aria also has a notable earlier model, in this case, Cleopatra's famous lament, "Piangerò la sorte mia," from *Giulio Cesare* (1724). Although this is not a case of true borrowing, the two arias have many similarities: both begin with lament bass descents, both feature rapid, vengeful rage motifs in their B sections, and both appear during a climactic moment in each opera.¹⁹¹ It should be noted, however, that unlike Cleopatra's lament, Deidamia does not follow a clear da capo form, instead shortening her A section reprise before suddenly launching yet again into her raging tirade to end the movement (in this way, the aria anticipates Handel's well-known version of "But who may abide the day of His coming" from *Messiah*, written for the castrato Guadagni in 1750). Even more noteworthy about this aria is that yet again we

¹⁹¹ In *Giulio Cesare*, this occurs in Act III, Scene 3 just after Cleopatra has been informed of Caesar's death.

see Handel choosing to tie a crucial tragic scene from his late operas to an earlier work dating well before the Metastasian reforms.

Such gestures give the impression that Handel is of a different opinion regarding the inevitably heroic resolution of the Metastasian “dilemma.” In these operas, Handel’s music suggests that when love is sacrificed to duty, there can be no happy ending. Indeed, these painful portraits of shattered women together tell an alternative story about the state of Italian opera in 1741, and reveal something about Handel’s composition of these two late works. For despite his concessions to changing, “enlightened” tastes, Handel in his final operas seems to resist the reforms that had swept the European continent. Rather, they stage a kind of failed heroics, mocking the warlike impulses of courageous men and dramatizing the personal loss that often accompanies civic compromise. If these last two operas can be considered among Handel’s “comic” works, it is the kind of comedy that takes on undeniably tragic dimensions.

The most bitter pill is yet to come. In the closing moments of *Deidamia*, after the heroine’s father “comforts” his daughter by telling her that Achilles is fated to die, the lovers are reunited but denied a final duet. Instead, what follows is a long duet between Deidamia and Ulysses—from which Achilles is conspicuously absent—and we arrive at the final chorus of the very last opera that Handel ever wrote. Here, the chorus, whose conventional role is to sum up the ultimate message of the work, sings an almost ludicrous paean to love:

Non trascurate, amanti,
gl'istanti del piacer;
volan per non tornar.

Se son le belle ingrate,
cangiate di pensier
Folle chi vuol penar.

Do not take for granted, lovers,
the moments of pleasure;
For they fly away, never to return.

If the lovers prove unkind,
they should change their minds,
It's folly to want to cause pain.

The stark emotional register of Deidamia's lament is undermined here by a moral lesson that trivializes her feelings and renders her pain insignificant. To make matters worse, Handel's musical setting of this chorus is even more bizarre (Ex. 3.9).

Example 3.9) Handel, *Deidamia*, Act III, Scene 7, Final Chorus. “Non trascurate, amanti”

18

vo - lan per non tor - nar, per non tor - nar, per non tor - nar,
sie keh-ret nie zu - rück, kehrt nie zu - rück, kehrt nie zu - rück,

vo - lan per non tor - nar, per non tor - nar, per non tor - nar,
sie keh-ret nie zu - rück, kehrt nie zu - rück, kehrt nie zu - rück,

vo - lan per non tor - nar, per non tor - nar, per non tor - nar,
sie keh-ret nie zu - rück, kehrt nie zu - rück, kehrt nie zu - rück,

vo - lan per non tor - nar, per non tor - nar, per non tor - nar,
sie keh-ret nie zu - rück, kehrt nie zu - rück, kehrt nie zu - rück,

20

vo - lan per non tor - nar. Se Ist
sie keh-ret nie zu - rück.

vo - lan per non tor - nar. Se Ist
sie keh-ret nie zu - rück.

vo - lan per non tor - nar. Se Ist
sie keh-ret nie zu - rück.

vo - lan per non tor - nar. Se Ist
sie keh-ret nie zu - rück.

fine

As the lilting, cheerful G major theme leads to its final cadence, the violins begin a unison descent through two octaves of the tonic scale, and in a hushed whisper, end on a lonely, quiet G. Not one of Handel's fifty-three other stage works ends like this, on a single unaccompanied note, and the effect, like Imeneo's inconclusive Act I chorus, is that of a glaring question mark at the end of the piece. The hollow descending line sounds more like a gesture of resignation, or of defeat, than a celebration of heroic masculinity, and it stands as an apt sonic equivalent of the unwilling concessions made by Handel's forlorn heroines.

Dramaturgically, *Deidamia*'s finale is wholly unsatisfying in any usual sense. Its music leaves us with an odd feeling of inconclusiveness that is only exacerbated by the chorus's ultimate moral lesson, which can effectively be summed up as: "Enjoy love while you can—and if you can't, find someone else." After Deidamia's sorrow has been unconvincingly (and only temporarily) deferred, and her lover has gone off to his death, this cheerful moral conclusion seems perfunctory, even inane, and its final cadential gesture rings unmistakably hollow. The emptiness of both words and music strips bare the operatic convention of the concluding ensemble, in many ways exposing it as nothing *but* convention: the cheerful chorus is there only because it has to be. That's what opera does.

Is Handel's decision to thwart his own ending an ironic gesture towards the very genre he is leaving behind, or is it simply an act of withdrawing from, or even giving up on, an art form which he had grown tired of writing? Winton Dean, among others, assumes the latter: "Despite its promising situations and a few superb arias, *Deidamia*

must be considered a failure. It was Handel's last opera, and much of the music is mechanical, as if he were losing interest after discovering in *Saul* the greater dramatic potentialities of oratorio."¹⁹² But in light of this chapter's discussion of the Metastasian reforms that had wholly overtaken Italian opera on the Continent, and was wholeheartedly embraced by composers of a younger generation, Dean's perfunctory conclusion seems just as unsatisfying as *Deidamia*'s perfunctory ending.

REFORMING THE REFORMERS

Handel's audiences were used to seeing Italian opera ridiculed. From the early writings of Addison and Steele in *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* to Aaron Hill and William Popple's vicious diatribes in *The Prompter*, there was already by 1740 a longstanding British tradition of regarding Italian opera as an irrational, effeminate art form. As I have demonstrated in previous chapters, opera's convoluted plots, its rigid conventions, the preeminence given to the ambiguously-gendered castrati, even the act of singing were all cited as proof that opera was nothing more than a joke. What Handel's audiences were not accustomed to seeing, however, was the ridicule of Italian opera *because* of its heroism, its rationality, and its masculinity. These were precisely the traits that were praised in the reform librettos of Metastasio, and if anything should have insulated opera from such accusations. Perhaps this was one of the reasons why Handel's audiences were

¹⁹² Dean, *Handel and the Opera Seria*, 116.

so perplexed by *Imeneo* and *Deidamia*. It would certainly explain why Jennens disparaged the two works despite his professed admiration for their music.

We may never fully understand why Handel, in his last attempt at opera, would have chosen to mock a genre for attempting to correct the inadequacies that had drawn the scorn of English critics for over thirty years. But it is hard to resist such a conclusion. Perhaps Handel, conscious that his operatic career had come to an end, betrays in these final operas his own sense of loss over the passing of an earlier age. Whatever the reason, he never looked back. We end with a question mark.

CHAPTER 4

SEMELE'S DEATH AND THE END OF OPERA

In recent years, *Semele* (1744) has become one of Handel's most frequently performed operas, having witnessed at least fifteen new stage productions and five commercial recordings over the past decade.¹⁹³ *Semele*'s growing popularity is hardly surprising, given its provocative story of sex, jealousy, adultery, and revenge, not to mention its vivid depiction of the principal heroine's death. There is also much to admire in Handel's score, which contains some of the most conspicuously 'operatic' music that Handel ever wrote: this includes an unusually large number of full da capo arias and an almost unprecedented amount of florid coloratura singing for the title role. For this reason, *Semele* has become well-known as a showpiece for star singers.¹⁹⁴

Semele, however, is not an opera. Although William Congreve's English libretto, first set to music by John Eccles in 1707, was originally intended for the operatic stage,

¹⁹³ These include productions in Chicago (dir. Christopher Cowell, 2002), Sydney (dir. Justin Way, 2002), Basil (dir. Karen Beier, 2003), Buxton, UK (dir. Stephen Langridge, 2003), Brussels (dir. David McVicar, 2004), Glasgow and Edinburgh (dir. John La Bouchardière, 2005), Toronto (dir. Tom Diamond, 2005), Long Beach, California (dir. Isabel Milensky, 2005), Tucson and Phoenix, Arizona (Chas Rader-Schiber, 2006), New York (Lawless, 2006), Essen (dir. Dietrich Hilsdorf, 2008), Cornwall, UK (dir. Simon Harvey, 2008), Brussels (dir. Zhang Huan, 2009), Cambridge, MA (dir. Victoria J. Crutchfield, 2009), Victoria, British Columbia (dir. Wim Trompert, 2009), and Hampstead (dir. James Hurley, 2011). New recordings have been issued by Decca (0743323, 2009), Chandos (CHAN 0745/3, 2007), Naxos (NAXOS 8.570431-33, 2008), Pierre Véron (PV704021/22, 2004), and ABC Classics Australia (ABC Classics 980 047-0, 2003).

¹⁹⁴ Kathleen Battle, Ruth Ann Swenson, and even the young Beverly Sills were recognized early in their careers for their interpretations of the title role, and in January of 2007, a Zürich production of *Semele* was given the distinction of being Cecilia Bartoli's first public appearance in a non-Italian operatic role.

Handel decided to mount the work—which he simply titled “The Story of Semele”—as an unstaged concert piece, “after the manner of an Oratorio,”¹⁹⁵ a fact that has posed a recurrent problem for those wishing to perform it today. Even Handel’s contemporaries were quick to point out the work’s generic ambiguities. After hearing the first performances in February of 1744, the Earl of Egmont wrote of having attended “the opera of ‘Semele’,” and Handel’s first biographer, Mainwaring, labeled the work “an English opera but called an Oratorio.”¹⁹⁶ Charles Jennens, hardly able to contain his contempt for a work he thought morally debased, went so far as to deem *Semele* “no Oratorio but a bawdy [*sic*] Opera,”¹⁹⁷ and ever since its first staged revival at Cambridge in 1925, *Semele* has been unable to shake its reputation as a theater piece, an opera in all but name.

If *Semele*’s resemblance to Italian opera has often invited stage treatment in recent years, however, its ambivalent performance history raises some interesting questions about Handel’s relationship to Italian opera in mid-eighteenth-century London. Handel’s decision to set *Semele* as a concert piece was closely tied to the events that led up to its premiere: faced with dwindling audiences, hostile factions, and a rival opera company that threatened his entire career, Handel seems to have written this “secular oratorio” as a

¹⁹⁵ Advertisement in the *London Daily Post*, February 10, 1744, quoted in Otto Erich Deutsch, *Handel: A Documentary Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1955), 581.

¹⁹⁶ William H. Grattan-Flood, “Handel and the Earl of Egmont,” *Musical Times* 65 (1924), 1016-1017; Mainwaring, *Memoirs of the Life of the Late George Frederic Handel* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1760), 152.

¹⁹⁷ Winton Dean, “Charles Jennens’s Marginalia to Mainwaring’s *Life of Handel*,” *Music & Letters* 53 (1972), 162.

pointed critique of Italian opera, one that was directed at his adversaries only two years after the composer himself had stopped writing opera altogether. By examining the circumstances surrounding *Semele*'s premiere, this final chapter will consider the ways in which *Semele*'s "baudy" operatic features might point to the works of Handel's Italian competitors, and might shed some light on Handel's own attitude toward changing currents in Italian opera after the end of his own operatic career.

REFLEX AND REPRESENTATION: SEMELE'S MIRROR

A key to understanding *Semele*'s close relationship to Italian opera seria lies in what is arguably the work's most extraordinary moment: Semele's mirror scene. Midway through Act III, the jealous Juno, seeking to end her husband Jupiter's love affair with the mortal Semele, finds the secret hideaway where Semele awaits her lover's return.

Disguised as Semele's sister, Juno arrives to entice her rival with promises of immortality, and after a carefully planted remark about Semele's godlike appearance, hands her a mirror as proof of her divine charms. Semele looks into the mirror and, delighted with what she sees, begins to sing:

<i>Semele</i>	Myself I shall adore
	If I persist in gazing.
	No object sure before
	Was ever half so pleasing.

Semele's mirror aria is perhaps her most memorable number, not only for its tuneful opening theme, clear two-bar phrases, and harmonic simplicity, but also because it features some of the most playful and unusual coloratura singing to be found in all of Handel (Ex. 4.1). We hear this most clearly during the humorous exchange between Semele and the orchestra, when the violins interrupt her melismatic vocal gestures, mid-breath, and echo them back to her, thus providing an easily recognizable musical 'mirror' to ornament her words (mm. 10-12, 17-19, 37-39). Such literal instances of word painting can be found in some of Handel's other works—"Ombre, piante" from *Rodelinda*, for example, uses an echo effect to represent another kind of visual reflection, the shades or "shadows" of the spirit world—but they are rarely so pervasive. Virtually all of Semele's melodic phrases end with a flurry of echoes that acutely halt the progress of her aria, and thus further prolong the interminable gazing that she purportedly seeks to end.

Example 4.1) *Semele*, Act III Aria, “Myself I shall adore” (Semele)

7  Semele

if I per - sist in ga - zing, if I per - sist in

My-self I shall a - dore, if I per-sist in ga-zing, if I per-sist in

10 ga - zing, in ga -

ga-zing, in ga -

14 - zing, my-self I shall a - dore, if I per - sist in

17 ga

(Cont.)

21

zing, in ga -

(Vns.) (Cont.)

24

zing, in ga - zing,

(Vns.) *f*

27

If I per-sist in

[mf]

30

ga-zing, my-self I shall a-dore, if I per-sist in ga-zing, my-self I shall a -

33

-dore, my-self I shall a - dore, if I per-sist in ga

(Cont.)

36

(Vns.)

39

- zing, my-self I shall a - dore,

42

if I per-sist in ga

(Cont.)

45

(Vns.) (Cont.)

48

zing, in ga -

51

-zing, in-ga - zing, my-self I shall a -

(Vns.) (Cont.)

54

Adagio

-dore, if I per-sist in ga -

ga - zing, in ga -

The scene's humor is heightened by the fact that whenever Semele returns to her "gazing," her vocal line grows progressively longer and more complex, each time wandering farther away from the home key: from F major, to C, and then quite unexpectedly, to Bb (m. 33). The longer she gazes, the more entranced she becomes, until she eventually manages to sing for nearly thirty seconds on a single vowel as she marvels at both her beauty and, significantly, the beauty of her own voice (mm. 43-49). In two distinct ways, Handel's setting thus makes an explicit connection between Semele's singing voice and her visual representation: mimetically, by sounding an echo in place of her reflection, and metaphorically, by equating Semele's gazing to the act of singing itself. It is a wonderfully clever musical depiction of vanity, and the scene will prove to play a crucial role in bringing the work to its ultimate moral conclusion: desiring to become a goddess herself, Semele demands that Jupiter reveal himself in his true form. When he agrees, his godlike brilliance burns her alive.

Apart from the "mirroring" of Semele's voice, however, what makes this scene so intriguing is its unmistakable reflexivity, in that Semele, for nearly seven minutes, does the very thing she tells herself not to do: persist in gazing. She not only persists for a very long time—the aria is nearly twice the length of most of Semele's other numbers—but she does so in a giddy display of vocal acrobatics that bears little resemblance to the kind of melodic writing we usually associate with Handel. Semele's vocal line is a catalogue of technical feats, comprised of broken arpeggios (mm. 10-12, 19-20, 37, 45), falling scales (mm. 12-13, 38, 48), repeated leaps (mm. 17-18, 46), excessive trills (mm. 20-22, 47-48), and chains of endless roulades (mm. 23-24, 35-36, 43-44, 50-51), all of which will be

taken to even greater heights in the improvisatory da capo. This vocal virtuosity is cast into stark relief by the aria's major mode and simple harmonic language, which alternates primarily between tonic and dominant functions—thus ensuring the near-total absence of minor-mode sonorities—and serves only to heighten the frivolity of the scene. Indeed, the aria seems a bit too long, the coloratura a bit too colorful, for us to take completely seriously, and it raises an important question about the function of the singer at this moment.

What might it mean for Handel to have written this aria for his leading lady, the French opera soprano Elisabeth Duparc, called “La Francesina,” when the role she plays is characterized principally by her vanity, her stubbornness, and her unreasonable demands? As Semele sings to excess, intoxicated by the sound of her own voice, it quickly becomes evident that, in this aria, virtuosity is antithetical to virtue. Handel's music subtly transforms the singer's prodigious vocal technique into the primary symptom of Semele's degeneracy, and thus implicates singing itself as a determining factor in her demise.¹⁹⁸ In view of this, and considering the widespread eighteenth-century reputation of the vain and jealous prima donna—a reputation made most famous in Handel's lifetime after the widely-publicized rivalry between Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni in the late 1720s¹⁹⁹—we might ask: at what point does shrewd musical

¹⁹⁸ Compare this to John Eccles's 1707 setting of the same scene from Congreve's libretto, which avoids such a characterization by treating the same four lines of text as a plain section of recitative. See Eccles, *Semele: An Opera*, ed. Richard Platt, *Musica Britannica* 76 (London: Stainer and Bell, 2000).

¹⁹⁹ See the discussion of the divas scandal in Chapter 2. For a summary of the satirical accounts that followed this scandal, see Suzanne Aspden, “The ‘rival queans’ and the play of identity in Handel's

characterization here give way to operatic parody, as Semele's reflected image becomes indistinguishable from that of the singer representing her, and the stage action becomes inextricable from the act of singing itself?

From the musical "mirroring" of Semele's voice to her self-reflexive act of singing/gazing, the mirror scene seems to blur the distinction between "The Story of Semele" and its own performance, thus dramatizing the very ambivalence that has surrounded the work since its premiere. In a world where reflections become echoes and corporeal acts are achieved by the human voice, we in the audience are bound to wonder whether the soprano is performing the part of Semele, or whether it works the other way around. The meta-theatrical effect would have been explicit, of course, in Handel's original concert presentation: La Francesina, deprived of a costume, a set, and other accoutrements of the stage—including, presumably, even a mirror in which to gaze—would at this moment have represented, in the most palpable form, both singer and would-be deity simultaneously. As proof of her divinity, we are offered the astonishing sound of her echoing voice. Thus, like the da capo, which is itself a kind of mirror image, an elaborate reflection which lies outside of the written score, Semele seems in performance to exceed the boundaries of her own story, perhaps even momentarily becoming the goddess—the "diva"—she longs to be.

If this characterization seems anachronistic, then perhaps it is because the term "diva" in its modern sense was unknown in Handel's day, and would not acquire common

Admeto," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18 (2006): 301–331 and James Wierzbicki, "Dethroning the Divas: Satire Directed at Cuzzoni and Faustina," *Opera Quarterly* 17 (2001): 175–96.

currency in English until the twentieth century.²⁰⁰ In the case of *Semele*, however, the idea of the “diva” seems particularly fitting, not just because of its melodramatic plot, but because the term resonates with current research on star celebrity and its manifestations in eighteenth-century theatrical life. In her recent article, “Producing Stars in *Dramma per musica*,” Berta Joncus has turned to contemporary film theory in order to explore how we might apply the apparatus of twentieth-century star creation in Hollywood to the singers of Italian opera seria.²⁰¹ Looking at the ways in which star personae were produced and disseminated on the London stage and in the British press, Joncus argues that many parallels exist between the modern idea of celebrity and notions of stardom that circulated in the eighteenth century. She concludes that celebrities have always been characterized by their active roles in creating their public persona both on and offstage, acting as both producer and product of their public image, which is then spread through gossip, the media, and in personal correspondence. *Semele*’s double image—on one hand, a vain, ambitious woman admiring herself in the mirror and on the other, a hopelessly conceited singer reveling in her own vocalises—thus resonates strongly with eighteenth-century ideas about operatic celebrities, and gives us reason to suspect an ulterior motive behind this scene.

²⁰⁰ The *OED* lists the earliest English appearance of the word “diva,” in the sense of “a distinguished female singer; a prima donna,” occurred in 1883. See “diva,” <<http://dictionary.oed.com>> (accessed August 2012).

²⁰¹ Berta Joncus, “Producing Stars in *Dramma Per Musica*,” in *Music as Social and Cultural Practice: Essays in Honour of Reinhard Strohm*, ed. Melania Bucciarelli and Berta Joncus (Woodbridge and Rochester: Boydell, 2007), 275-293.

Indeed, the image of an opera singer staring into a mirror was not new. Countless vocal treatises dating back to the sixteenth century recommend that voice students practice before a mirror so as not to distort their faces as they sing.²⁰² Mary Pendarves's account of at least one Handel opera attests to her familiarity with the practice:

The last is [Francesca] Bertoli, she has neither voice, ear, nor manner to recommend her, but she is a perfect beauty, quite a Cleopatra, that sort of complexion with regular features, fine teeth, and when she sings has a smile about her mouth which is extreme pretty, and I believe she has practiced to sing before a glass, for she has never any distortion in her face.²⁰³

British opinion of Italian opera singers in Handel's time, moreover, was rarely laudatory: contemporary diatribes invariably mention the insatiable greed of famous singers like Senesino, Farinelli, Cuzzoni, and Faustina, all of whom were of low birth yet earned some of the largest salaries in all of Britain. And a 1727 pamphlet presented as a fictitious farce called "The Contre-Temps, or, Rival Queens," reveals another commonly-held opinion of Italian sopranos in a soliloquy delivered by Faustina herself:

²⁰² See Giovanni Camillo Maffei, *Discorso della Voce* (Naples, 1562); Giovanni Battista Mancini, *Pensieri e riflessioni pratiche sopra il canto figurato* (Vienna, 1774), and Pier Francesco Tosi, *Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni*, (Bologna, 1723), trans. *Observations on the Florid Song* (London 1743), 89: "When he studies his Lesson at Home, let him sometimes sing before a Looking-glass, not to be enamoured with his own Person, but to avoid those convulsive Motions of the Body, or of the Face (for so I call the Grimaces of an affected Singer) which, when once they have took Footing, never leave him."

²⁰³ Letter to Ann Granville, November or December, 1729. Quoted in Deutsch.

Faustina Pride rules our female souls; thus Faustinas fir'd, we dare
 Like man all dangers scorn; and thirst for war:
 Our little breasts will pant and heave for fame
 Swell'd with th' ambition of the foremost name.²⁰⁴

Faustina's pride, ambition, and lust for fame not only serves as a critique of the Italian singer, but also echoes the overt narrative of *Semele*'s plot. Such parallels seem to be more than coincidental; indeed, there is reason to believe that Handel composed *Semele* as a direct attack on Italian opera amidst an unusual series of events that took place in the early 1740s.

COMPETITION AND OPERA GOSSIP, 1741-1744

Handel's last opera, *Deidamia*, was one of his most miserable failures, receiving only three performances in January of 1741. That April, a long letter appeared in the *London Daily Post*, in which one of Handel's supporters lamented the current "fashion to neglect him":

Shall we then after so many Years Possession, upon a single Disgust, upon a faux
 Pas made, but not meant, so intirely [*sic*] abandon him, as to let him Want in a
 Country he has so long served? ... I wish I could urge this Apology to its full

²⁰⁴ *The Contre-Temps, or, Rival Queens: A Small Farce As it was lately Acted, with great Applause, at H—d—r's private Th—re near the H—y M—t* (July, 1727).

Efficacy, and persuade the Gentlemen who have taken Offence at any Part of this great Man's Conduct ... to take him back into Favour, and relieve him from the cruel Persecution of those little Vermin, who, taking Advantage of their Displeasure, pull down even his Bills as fast as he has them pasted up; and use a thousand other little Arts to injure and distress him.²⁰⁵

Exactly what kind of “faux pas” Handel had made to provoke such hostility is unknown. For several years there had been opposition to the oratorios, especially from opera-loving aristocrats who complained that such works were not only poor substitutes for opera, but that tickets to the unstaged oratorios often ran at the same, if not higher, rates as their lavish Italian counterparts.²⁰⁶

The more immediate cause for the antagonism, however, seems to have been Handel's decision to mount his own series of works against a rival opera company established the previous season by Charles Sackville, Earl of Middlesex. Although Middlesex had managed to mount a short season of unstaged serenatas by the Venetian composer Giovanni Battista Pescetti in 1739-40, he was unable to acquire an adequate number of opera subscribers for the following season, and the enterprise was temporarily

²⁰⁵ *London Daily Post*, April 4, 1741, *Deutsch*, 516.

²⁰⁶ A similar public outrage occurred in 1733 when Handel charged a full guinea for the first performances of *Deborah*—twice the amount usually charged for opera. Subscribers responded with indignation and even violence, pushing past the ushers and into the theater. See Lady Irwin's letter to Lord Carlisle, March 31, 1733, and the *Craftsman*, April 7, 1733. Quoted in *Deutsch*, 309-311.

abandoned that year.²⁰⁷ The subsequent outcry against Handel may have therefore been retaliation from Middlesex's supporters, angered that Handel's own subscription had drawn support away from their venture. Whatever the cause of the offense, Handel left London for Dublin in September of 1741. He would never write opera again.

The Earl of Middlesex belonged to a younger generation of aristocrats who, having traveled to Europe during the 1730s, had grown fond of the lighter, *galant* sound of the Neapolitan operas favored in Italy at the time.²⁰⁸ Thus, when Middlesex mounted his first full opera seasons beginning in the fall of 1741, he imported several young composers whose music reflected this new taste—Galuppi, Lampugnani, and eventually, Gluck—in addition to Pescetti, Veracini, and Porpora, onetime rivals of Handel during the 1730s. The first season, however, was irregularly attended, and Middlesex and his directors suffered heavy losses. It seems that many London theatergoers were unimpressed by the new operas, and in particular by their music, which, Horace Walpole confessed, “displeases everybody.”²⁰⁹ Although Walpole did not give a reason for the public's dissatisfaction, Charles Burney suggests that it may have had something to do with the lighter, “modern” style represented by the Italian composers. While discussing Galuppi's *Penelope*, first produced in December of 1741, Burney wrote, “The Genius of

²⁰⁷ For a brief history of Middlesex's opera company, see Carole Taylor, “From Losses to Lawsuit: Patronage of the Italian Opera in London by Lord Middlesex, 1739-1745,” *Music & Letters*, 68 (1987), 1-25.

²⁰⁸ On the history and development of this style and its dissemination from Naples, see Daniel Hertz, *Music in European Capitals: The Galant Style, 1720-1780* (New York and London: Norton, 2003), 16-23, 171-187.

²⁰⁹ Letter to Horace Mann, 5 November, 1741, *Ibid.*, 523.

Galuppi was as not yet matured. He now copied the hasty, light, and flimsy style which reigned in Italy at this time, and which Handel's solidity and science had taught the English to despise."²¹⁰

Contemporary reports confirm Burney's assessment. On December 5, 1741, Thomas Harris, one of Handel's friends and ardent supporters, sarcastically wrote to his brother James: "Sir Wyndham Knatchbull, Charles Jennens and I say the present opera is abominably bad, but Dr. Green says it's in the new taste which the English have not yet genius enough to comprehend."²¹¹ Three weeks later, Robert Price defended the Middlesex operas, complaining that Londoners "cannot bear anything but Handel, Courelli [sic], and Geminiani, which they are eternally playing ever and ever again."²¹² These accounts suggest that by late 1741 a split had occurred among members of London's operagoing public, between those who preferred the "solid" contrapuntal music of an earlier age and a younger generation of aristocrats whose recent travels had cultivated a taste for the new Italian style.

By the time Handel returned from Ireland in August of 1742, news of his great success abroad had become widespread in London, and Handel immediately began

²¹⁰ Burney, *A General History of Music: From the Earliest Ages to the Present*, IV (London: T. Becket, 1776), 447. Burney later added, in reference to another Middlesex composer, Giovanni Battista Lampugnani: "He was thought slight and flimsy when he was here; as all musical people were then imbued with the solidity of Corelli, Geminiani, and Handel, and were unwilling that any composer should turn over a new leaf, or advance one step further." *Ibid.*, 451.

²¹¹ The opera was the pasticcio *Alessandro in Pesia*, with music by Galuppi, Pescetti, Lampugnani, Hasse, Leonardo Leo, Domenico Scarlatti, and Giuseppe Arena. Letter to James Harris, December 5, 1741, in Donald Burrows and Rosemary Dunhill, *Music and Theatre in Handel's World: The Family Papers of James Harris, 1732-1780* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 129.

²¹² Robert Price, Letter to Thomas, Earl of Haddington, December 19, 1741, *Deutsch*, 528.

planning a short spring season that would consist of nothing but English-language oratorios: *Samson*, *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, *ed Il Moderato*, and the London debut of *Messiah*. The performances were well attended, as Walpole wryly attests:

Handel has set up an Oratorio against the Operas, and succeeds. He has hired all the goddesses from farces and the singers of *Roast Beef* from between the acts at both theatres, with a man with one note in his voice and a girl without ever an one; and so they sing, and make brave hallelujahs; and the good company encore the recitative, if it happens to have any cadence like what they call a tune.²¹³

For the season Handel had hired British singers best known for their roles in comic theater: John Beard was a popular ballad singer from Covent Garden; Thomas Lowe, a tenor, was acquired from Drury Lane; and Kitty Clive and Susannah Cibber, the “goddesses of the farces,” were the two most celebrated comic actresses of their day.²¹⁴ Handel’s appeal to a large sector of the London public, with English works performed by popular British actors, did much to bolster his public image. Lady Hertford observed that the oratorio performances were “filled with all the people of quality in town.”²¹⁵ An Irish newspaper, reporting from London, called Handel “more esteemed now than ever,” and

²¹³ Letter to Horace Mann, February 24, 1743, *Ibid.*, 560.

²¹⁴ In a remarkable parallel to Italian opera in the Royal Academy Years, Clive and Cibber became embroiled in their own infamous divas quarrel when a public dispute erupted in 1736 over which actress was the better interpreter of Polly in *The Beggar’s Opera*. For a brief account, see Mary Nash, *The Provoked Wife: The Life and Times of Susannah Cibber* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown & Co., 1977), 97-104. Also see Berta Joncus, “‘In Wit Superior as in Fighting’: Kitty Clive and the Conquest of a Rival Queen,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 72/4 (2010): 23-42.

²¹⁵ Letter from Hertford to her son, Lord Beauchamp, February 26, 1743. Quoted in *Deutsch*, 561-2.

declared that that the London public “will be no longer imposed on by Italian Singers, and some wrong Headed Undertakers of bad Opera’s.”²¹⁶

Perhaps in an attempt to cater to a wider audience after a number of unsuccessful opera seasons, Middlesex approached Handel in the summer of 1743 with a commission to write Italian operas for his company, newly relocated to the King’s Theatre. Backed by a £500 subsidy from Frederick, Prince of Wales, Middlesex offered Handel 1,000 guineas for two new operas, a sum which, according to Handel’s copyist, was more than the composer had ever been offered in his long career. For unknown reasons, Handel refused the commission. Although he agreed to adapt one of his older operas, *Alessandro*, for Middlesex the following year, Handel never again considered writing Italian opera, with disastrous consequences for his reputation among his aristocratic patrons.

Problems escalated during the season of 1743-44, the year of *Semele*’s premiere. Upon declining Middlesex’s request, Handel had claimed that, for health reasons, he could no longer compose. In truth, he was composing prodigiously, and the resulting work was *Semele*, completed in early July of 1743. When word spread that Handel was planning a new subscription, public outrage ensued: the idea that the composer could write for himself but not for the nobility was perceived as a direct affront to those who had supported him for over twenty years. John Christopher Smith wrote to James Harris expressing his concern:

²¹⁶ *Faulkner’s Dublin Journal*, March 15, 1743.

I could wish Mr. Handel had agreed with Lord Middlesex to compose for the operas this winter; it would turn vastly to his advantage, for you can't imagine how the Quality—and even his friends—resent it, to refuse such offers, they have made him.²¹⁷

It seems that the Prince of Wales himself approached Handel about the matter, but Handel again rejected the offer, and the disagreement quickly turned into open antagonism.²¹⁸ Following *Semele*'s first performance, Mary Delany was shocked to hear that “Mr. Handel and the Prince had quarreled,” adding that “Handel says that the *Prince* is quite out of *his* good graces!”²¹⁹ Such behavior from a common citizen to someone at the highest level of British nobility was seen by many as a flagrant insult, and the backlash was severe: it was rumored that Handel had been stripped of his £200 Royal teaching annuity, and word began to spread of a noble opposition party determined to ruin Handel's oratorio season.²²⁰

The opening performances of *Semele* at Covent Garden were met with an attempted boycott from the “opera people.” Though their efforts had only a slight impact on the first night—Delany noted “the house full, but not crowded”—Middlesex's

²¹⁷ October 4, 1743, *Burrows and Dunhill*, 167.

²¹⁸ A week later, Smith wrote of Handel's “ill advised” decision to “fly in the Prince of Wales's and the Quality's face as he has done.” Letter to Harris, October 11, 1743. *Ibid.*, 167.

²¹⁹ Letter of February 11 to Anne Dewes. *Deutsch*, 582.

²²⁰ On the loss of Handel's annuity for teaching the royal princesses, see Shaftesbury's letter to James Harris, January 12, 1744. In the same letter, Shaftesbury sadly remarks, “The Opera people take incredible pains to hurt him [Handel] ... He has poor man very powerful enemies.” *Burrows and Dunhill*, 183.

supporters were successful in ending *Semele*'s run after only three performances.²²¹ By the time *Semele* was revived the following winter, attempts at a boycott had redoubled, and members of the opera party began to buy up tickets to the theater and hold parties for the nobility in order to draw audiences away from the oratorios. On November 6, 1744, John Robartes, Fourth Earl of Radnor attended the revival of *Deborah*:

Captain Bodens tells me of ten assembly's made against him [Handel], as also Lady Brown, who engaged every soul she knew at the play the same night. This is but an ill requital for the great additional expence he has lately put himself to; in short, Lady Brown and such fine Italian ladeys, will bear nothing but Italian singers, and composers.²²²

Lady Margaret Cecil Brown was married to Sir Robert Brown, a banker who had made his fortune in Venice, where the two lived between 1725 and 1734.²²³ While in Italy, Lady Brown befriended Farinelli and frequented the opera, where she seems to have developed a taste for the new Italian style.²²⁴ Whether she, like many others, was

²²¹ "They say Samson is to be next Friday, for Semele has a strong party against it, viz. the fine ladies, petit maîtres, and ignoramus's. All the opera people are enraged at Handel." Delany, letter to Ann Dewes, February 21, 1744, *Deutsch*, 584.

²²² Letter to James Harris, November 6, 1744, *Burrows and Dunhill*, 204. A similar account from the Earl of Shaftesbury mentions "one Miss Matthews" who bought fifty tickets to Drury Lane in January of 1745 "in order to hurt Handel," *Ibid.*, 210.

²²³ David Hunter, "Margaret Cecil, Lady Brown: 'Persevering Enemy to Handel' but 'Otherwise Unknown to History,'" *Women & Music* 3 (1999), 43.

²²⁴ This is confirmed by Thomas Harris, who in 1746 described the audience at Galuppi's pasticcio, *Il trionfo della Continenza*: "the opera is crowded with laced coats & rich gowns, though it's as dull a one as ever was made; but so is Lady Brown's pleasure." Letter to James Harris, February 20, 1746, *Burrows and Dunhill*, 224.

“enraged at Handel” for his perceived insolence or simply had a predilection for the lighter music promoted by Middlesex, her efforts seem to have worked: three weeks after Radnor’s letter, Handel’s publisher, John Walsh, lamented the thin audience at the second performance of *Deborah*, “the gallery very full, the pit and boxes almost empty, a strong party against him supported by Lady Brown.”²²⁵ *Semele*’s final performances took place in December 1744, and by January the Earl of Shaftesbury’s pronouncement was grim: “seeing things go on so horribly, the poor man must, to save himself from ruin, think of retiring.”²²⁶

GALANT LAUGHTER AND OPERA PARODY

Handel, therefore, certainly had reason to be resentful of the Middlesex opera and its supporters. As early as 1741 it was clear that he did not hold the rival company in high regard. The summer before Handel’s departure for Ireland, Thomas Dampier reported, “he laughs very much at the opera which is preparing for next winter,”²²⁷ and the composer himself confessed his contempt for the Middlesex operas, writing to Charles Jennens from Dublin:

²²⁵ Letter to James Harris, November 27, 1744, *Ibid.*, 207.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 210.

²²⁷ Letter dated 30 July, 1741 to William Windham, Benjamin Stillingfleet, and Thomas, Earl of Haddington. *Deutsch*, 520.

As for the News of Your Opera's, I need not trouble you, for all this town is full of their ill success, by a number of Letters from Your quarters to the People of Quality here, and I can't help saying but that it furnishes great Diversion and laughter. The first Opera I heard my Self before I left London, and it made me very merry all along my journey.²²⁸

Handel follows this by referring to the leading soprano of the Middlesex company, Signora Visconti, as a "salope",²²⁹ a surprising breach of decorum in a letter addressed to the prudish Jennens, and a telling confession given the composer's decision eighteen months later to set *Semele*, a work Jennens himself considered too immoral to attend.²³⁰ Handel's obvious contempt for his operatic rivals leads one to suspect that *Semele*'s spoiled, libidinous heroine might represent, if not a direct parody of Visconti, then perhaps a satirical portrait of the proverbial *prima donna*, and it raises the possibility that these sentiments may have found their way into Handel's musical setting.

The testimony of Handel's contemporaries seems to support such a conclusion, and it might explain some of the bizarre vocal writing that repeatedly creeps into *Semele*'s

²²⁸ December 19, 1741, *Ibid.* 530-531.

²²⁹ "Of the second opera, call'd Penelope, a certain noble man writes very jocosely, *il faut que je dise avec Harlequin, nôtre Penelope n'est qu'un Sallôpe.*" *Ibid.* This was probably the Italian soprano, Caterina Visconti, who had made her debut in Florence in 1729. See Colin Timms, "Caterina Visconti," in *Grove Music Online* <www.grovemusic.com> (accessed 15 August, 2012).

²³⁰ "I sent [some]one to Mr. Handel to subscribe for me to his entertainments, with an exception to *Semele*, upon which he refus'd to take my subscription. I have since given him a 2nd dose. Deborah has been perform'd twice to very thin audiences, & *Semele* comes forth to morrow, I hope to a thinner." Jennens to James Harris, November 30, 1744, *Burrows and Dunhill*, 208.

music. In an account of Porpora's *Temistocle* (1743), an opera premiered by Middlesex just four months before Handel began working on *Semele*, Charles Burney wrote:

The shakes... seem strange from so great a singing master. I never saw Music in which shakes were so lavished; Porpora seems to have composed the air:

Contrasto assai, in a shivering fit.²³¹

Nicola Porpora was from Naples, the birthplace of the galant style favored by the London nobility during these years, and his music shares many of the traits common to younger composers of the time, including more homophonic orchestral textures, and lighter, more flexible vocal melodies.²³² Porpora was also a renowned vocal pedagogue—he taught the young Farinelli and Caffarelli—and his writing for the voice had the reputation for being highly, even excessively, elaborate during his lifetime: the Emperor Charles VI was said to dislike Porpora's "capering style," which he considered "too full of trills and *mordenti*."²³³ Stendhal tells the story of a commission Porpora once received from the Austrian emperor for a new oratorio, which Porpora, in a seeming concession to his employer's taste, was said to have written without the use of a single trill. In the oratorio's final fugue, however, Porpora is said to have introduced a fugal subject that consisted of nothing but four ascending trills, the effect of which reached a feverish pitch in the culminating stretto:

²³¹ Burney, 450.

²³² Michael F. Robinson places Porpora's musical style squarely within this galant tradition. See Robinson and Kurt Markstrom, "Porpora, Nicola," in *Grove Music Online* <www.grovemusic.com> (accessed November 15, 2012).

²³³ Stendhal, *Vies de Haydn, de Mozart et de Metastase*, trans. Robert Brewin (London: John Murray, 1817), 141-2.

When the emperor, who was privileged never to laugh, heard in the full height of the fugue this deluge of trills, which seemed like the music of some enraged paralytics, he could no longer maintain his gravity, and laughed, perhaps for the first time in his life.²³⁴

Porpora's fugue does not survive, but much of the existing music from his London operas confirms his penchant for ornamentation.

For example, "Contrasto assai," the "shivering" aria described by Burney, is characterized by its numerous unprepared trills, approached by wide leaps from below, and rapid gruppetti in sixteenth-note figurations (Ex. 4.2). In addition to the florid vocal line, originally written for the celebrated soprano castrato, Angelo Maria Monticelli, the aria's galant features can be heard in the repeated ostinato accompaniment—what Burney calls "the modern style of iterated notes"²³⁵—and relatively slow harmonic rhythm (Ex. 4.2, mm. 6-9). "È specie di tormento," also from Porpora's *Temistocle*, is even more striking for its incessant trills. Composed for Signora Visconti, Middlesex's leading soprano, the aria displays the same "modern" accompaniment found in "Contrasto assai," but, true to Porpora's reputation, its florid vocal line is even more elaborate, containing no fewer than fourteen trills to be executed over the course of ten bars (Ex. 4.3).

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

²³⁵ Burney, *General History*, IV, 252. Burney frequently refers to this "modern" or "lyric" Italian style, and traces its origins to Naples in the 1720s and 1730s: "the clear and quiet accompaniment in iterated notes was that which Hasse and Vinci rendered fashionable, and which subsequent masters carried to excess," *Ibid.* 351, cf. 464.

Example 4.2) Porpora, *Temistocle*, “Contrasto assai”²³⁶

The musical score is presented in three systems, each featuring a Soprano vocal line and a Harpsichord accompaniment. The key signature is D major (two sharps) and the time signature is common time (C). The Soprano part includes lyrics in Italian, with trills (tr) and fermatas (tr~) indicated above certain notes. The Harpsichord part provides a rhythmic and harmonic foundation, often using arpeggiated figures and sustained chords.

System 1: The Soprano begins with the lyrics "Con-tra - - - sto as-sai più deg-no più". The Harpsichord accompaniment features a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a more active bass line.

System 2: The Soprano continues with "deg-no Com-in-cie-rà se vuoi - - or che la gio - -". The Harpsichord part becomes more complex, with the right hand playing chords and the left hand maintaining a rhythmic accompaniment.

System 3: The Soprano concludes with "- - - ria in noi la glo-ria in noi. L'o - dio". The Harpsichord part features a series of chords in the right hand and a rhythmic pattern in the left hand.

²³⁶ [“A worthier contrast / will begin, if you desire / Now that our glory / has changed hatred into love”].

Example 4.3) Porpora, *Temistocle*, “È specie di tormento”²³⁷

The musical score is written for Soprano (S) and Harpsichord (Hpschd.). It is in the key of D major (two sharps) and common time (C). The score is divided into four systems, each with a Soprano staff and a Harpsichord staff. The lyrics are in Italian and are written below the Soprano staff.

System 1: The Soprano staff begins with a whole rest, followed by a series of eighth and sixteenth notes. The Harpsichord staff provides a rhythmic accompaniment with chords and moving lines. The lyrics are: "Trop - po mi sembra estremo te - mo che un sogno sia te - mo che un sogno sia".

System 2: The Soprano staff continues with eighth and sixteenth notes, including trills (tr) and grace notes. The Harpsichord staff continues with chords and moving lines. The lyrics are: "te - mo des - tar - mi e te - mo te - mo a pal - - - -".

System 3: The Soprano staff continues with eighth and sixteenth notes, including trills (tr) and grace notes. The Harpsichord staff continues with chords and moving lines. The lyrics are: "pi - ti tor - nar - - - - à pal -".

System 4: The Soprano staff continues with eighth and sixteenth notes, including trills (tr) and grace notes. The Harpsichord staff continues with chords and moving lines. The lyrics are: "pi - ti tor -".

²³⁷ [“It seems to me overwhelming / I fear it is all a dream / I am afraid I will awaken / and return to my pain.”]

This delicate, even mannered kind of ornamentation was not unique to Porpora, and was often associated with composers writing in the new Italian idiom. In fact, the eighteenth-century use of the word “galant” was more likely to be associated with melodic artifice than with its so-called “pre-classical” tendencies toward homophonic textures and regular periodic structures. In 1754, Quantz identified “galant” melodies as those that were “adorned with many little figures and rapid notes,”²³⁸ and Kirnberger would later speak of a “galant style” characterized by its “decorative excesses.”²³⁹ Heinrich Koch, whom Daniel Heartz has viewed as the final authority on the term as it existed in the eighteenth century, distinguished the galant from the learned style by its “many elaborations of the melody, and divisions of the principal melodic tones.”²⁴⁰ Such descriptions are ubiquitous in theoretical writings about the new Italian style, whose tendency towards homophonic textures and periodic phrases made it an ideal vehicle for ornate vocal display.

This elaborate vocal writing is reflected in the decorative melodies of the operas produced by Middlesex during these years. A striking example is “Se d’un amor tiranno,”

²³⁸ Johann Joachim Quantz, *Lebenslauf*, in Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, *Kritische Briefe iiber die Tonkunst* I (Berlin 1759-60), 345. Quoted in David A. Sheldon, “The Galant Style Revisited and Reevaluated,” *Acta Musicologica*, 47 (1975), 255. Sheldon notes that, “Taken broadly, *Galanterie* meant expressive, perhaps even compositional nuance; specifically it signified melodic figuration and ornamentation,” *Ibid.*, 254.

²³⁹ Johann Philipp Kirnberger, *Die Kunst des reinen Satzes in der Musik* (Berlin, 1771), trans. David Beach and Jürgen Thym in *The Art of Strict Musical Composition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 99.

²⁴⁰ Koch, “Galant,” *Musikalisches Lexicon* (Frankfurt, 1802), trans. Leonard G. Ratner in *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York: Schirmer, 1980). Quoted in Heartz, *Music in European Capitals*, 19.

an aria by the Neapolitan composer, Giuseppe Arena, probably written sometime in the late 1730s (Ex. 4.4). The aria was included in the Middlesex pasticcio *Alessandro in Persia*, the opera Handel attended in 1741 and subsequently ridiculed in his letter to Jennens. It was sung by none other than Signora Visconti, the unfortunate target of Handel's vulgar slur. Arena's vocal line is noteworthy for its reverse-dotted, Lombard rhythms—widely considered a galant affectation by eighteenth-century theorists²⁴¹—and, even more prominently, for its stunning cadenza of fifteen uninterrupted trills, which, taken together, hardly leave time for the singer to breathe (mm. 7-10). If Porpora's trilling fugue is forever lost, surely Arena's quivering conclusion captures a trace of its intended effect.

²⁴¹ The so-called "scotch snap" was expressly singled out by Johann Adolph Scheibe in 1736 as being a "Galanterie." Scheibe, *Compendium Musices*, in *Die deutsche Kompositionslehre des 18. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Peter Benary. *Jenaer Beiträge zur Musikforschung*, III (Leipzig, 1961), 37-38. Quoted in Sheldon, "The Galant Style Revisited," 257.

Example 4.4) Arena, *Alessandro in Persia*, “Se d’un amor tiranno”²⁴²

[illegible]

²⁴² [If a tyrannical lover, / believes that he will win, / Let me deceive him / let me entice him / that I am no longer in love].

Such excessive trills are particularly suggestive when heard alongside “The morning lark,” the first full aria given to La Francesina in Act I of Handel’s *Semele*. The scene is Semele’s wedding day, where the mortal heroine awaits her impending marriage to Athamas, a man she does not love. In a moment of desperation, Semele calls upon Jupiter to intervene in the ceremony; her chilling, minor-mode passage of accompagnato recitative, sets the somber mood:

Semele (apart) Ah me!

What refuge now is left me?

How various, how tormenting

Are my miseries!

A haunting, C minor arietta follows (“O Jove, in pity,” marked *Larghetto andante, e sempre piano*), in which the mortal asks for Jupiter’s guidance. Before the god is given a chance to respond, however, Semele suddenly hears a singing lark and, quite unexpectedly, breaks into a long da capo aria comparing her sorrows to the bird’s song:

Semele The morning lark to mine accords his note,

And tunes to my distress his warbling throat.

Each setting and each rising sun I mourn.

Waiting alike his absence and return.

The dissonant preceding music now gives way to galant F major filigree, as Semele imitates the innumerable trills of her sympathetic companion (Ex. 4.5).

Example 4.5) *Semele*, Act I, Scene 1, “The morning lark” (Semele)

tunes to my dis-tress his

15 war - - - - -

17 - - - - -

19 - - - - - bling-throat, and tunes to my dis-

21

-tress _____ his war - - -

(Cont.)

23

(Strs.)

bling throat;

f

Semele's playful invocations of the lark's "warbling throat" do much to out-trill even Porpora, and could very well be some of the most exaggerated "shivering" to be found in all of Handel's operas. It should be noted that Handel wrote two other bird arias for La Francesina, "Nasconde l'usignol" from *Deidamia* and "Sweet bird" in *L'Allegro, Il Penseroso, ed Il Moderato*, and though both contain quite a bit of complex figuration, neither aria features trilling to such a degree (indeed, "Nasconde l'usignol" contains no trills at all).

In "The morning lark," Semele's sudden change of mood is surprising, not only because her aria is totally irrelevant to the dramatic situation—it is invariably the first number to be cut in modern adaptations—but also because it seems glib in comparison to the somber music that preceded it: if Semele's "distress" sounds anything like the light warblings of this little lark, we have reason to question her sincerity. The irony is heightened by the fact that Semele's ten-minute monologue is immediately preceded by her father's request that she "Invent no new delay/On this auspicious day." Why then, in her darkest hour, after her stirring appeal to the gods, would Semele pause to sing this galant distraction, full of cascading roulades (Ex. 4.5, mm. 18-19), aimless scalar ascents (m. 22), and delicate trills on dotted sixteenth-notes (mm. 13-17, 23-24), all of which bear more than a slight resemblance to her mirror aria?²⁴³ Was this Handel's weak attempt to cater to changing aristocratic tastes, or might he have intended to satirize the frivolous, trilling music of his operatic competitors?

²⁴³ See esp. m. 47 of the mirror aria, which contains the same rhythmic turn/trill figure as "The morning lark."

The hostile situation leading up to *Semele*'s debut certainly gives us reason to suspect the latter interpretation, and parallel arguments can be made for many of Semele's other arias. This is particularly evident in the virtuosic coloratura Handel gave to La Francesina, which resembles much of the ornate vocal writing produced by his rivals. While describing Francesco Maria Veracini's *Rosalinda* (1744), an opera mounted by Middlesex just two weeks before *Semele*'s premiere, Charles Burney called Veracini's music "wild, awkward, [*sic*] and unpleasant, manifestly produced by a man unaccustomed to write for the voice, and one possessed of a *capo pazzo*."²⁴⁴ Although Handel would not have known the music to *Rosalinda* at the time he was composing *Semele*, Lord Hervey anticipated Burney's opinion of Veracini nearly a decade earlier when, after attending a performance of the composer's *Adriano in Syria* in 1735, he wrote to Charlotte Digby:

I am this moment returned with the King from yawning four hours at the longest and dullest Opera that ever the ennobled ignorance of our present musical Governors ever inflicted on the ignorance of an English audience; who, generally speaking, are equally skilful in the language of the drama and the music it is set to, a degree of knowledge or ignorance (call it which you please) that on this occasion is no great misfortune to them, the drama being composed by an anonymous fool, and the music by one Veracini, a madman.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ Burney, 451.

²⁴⁵ Letter to Charlotte Digby, November 25, 1735. *Deutsch*, 395-6.

Veracini was best known in his lifetime as a virtuoso violinist, and he was often accused of writing music that was better suited for the violin than for the voice. Even his violin playing was said to be “too wild and flighty for the taste of the English,” for which reason, according to Burney, he “had the honour of being thought mad.”²⁴⁶ A typical example of this wild vocal style can be found in “Amor dover rispetto,” an aria Veracini gave to Farinelli during his years writing for Porpora’s company (Ex. 4.6). Featuring leaps of a tenth, a range of nearly two octaves, and breathtaking passages of coloratura that run, practically uninterrupted, for over twenty bars, the aria represents the pinnacle of eighteenth-century vocal virtuosity, and is representative of the bravura showpieces Farinelli frequently sang in the 1730s.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶ Burney, IV, 640; III, 569.

²⁴⁷ E.g., Riccardo Broschi’s “Qual guerriero,” (*Idaspe*, 1730) and “Son qual nave” (*Artaserse*, 1734). Published in Luigi Verdi and Maria Pia Jacoboni, eds., *Arie per Carlo Broschi Farinelli* (Bologna: Associazione Clavicembalistica Bolognese, 2007), and Jacobini, *Arie di Farinelli* (Bologna: Edizioni Bongiovanni, 1997).

Example 4.6) Veracini, *Adriano in Siria*, “Amor dover rispetto”²⁴⁸

Soprano

34 a lascerar

38

42 mi a lascerar

²⁴⁸ [“Love, duty, and respect / in a tormented breast / are all armed / to pierce the heart.”]

46

50

54

tr

mi il cor.

This excessive kind of vocal display bears a striking resemblance to Semele's own wild music, most notably, her near-impossibly fast final aria, "No, no, I'll take no less," which appears at the climactic moment of Act III, when Semele insists that Jupiter reveal his godhead. The preceding scene unfolds as a fluid succession of arioso and accompagnato recitative. Jupiter, aroused by a vision of Semele sent to him in a dream, arrives to solicit sexual favors ("Come to my arms, my lovely fair/Soothe my uneasy care"); Semele resists his advances ("I always am granting, you always complain"); and Jupiter promises to grant her whatever she desires, only to realize too late what the consequences will be. He warns her of the danger she faces ("Ah, take heed what you press"), and, in a forceful display of vocal *passaggi*, tries to compel her to rescind. Semele, however, refuses to bend, and in her last da capo aria delivers a torrent of unrelenting coloratura that silences Jupiter's preceding thunder (Ex. 4.7):

Semele No, no, I'll take no less!

 Than all in due excess!

 Your oath it may alarm you.

 Yet haste and prepare,

 For I'll know what you are,

 with all your powers arm you.

Example 4.7) *Semele*, Act III, Scene 4, “No, no I’ll take no less” (Semele)

13

your oath it may a - larm you, your oath it may a - larm

(Cont.)

17

21

you, your oath it may a - larm

(Vns.) (Cont.)

25

you.

(Vns.)
f

29

No, no, I'll take no less, than all in full ex -

p

33

-cess! your oath it may a - larm you, your oath it may a -

(Cont.)

37

-larm

tr

41

you, your oath it may a -

(Vns.)

Semele's demands are achieved by a blinding display of virtuosity that recalls the extravagant vocal writing associated with composers like Veracini, and greatly exceeds anything Handel had ever previously composed for *La Francesina*. Mary Delany recognized this at *Semele*'s first performance, noting that "La Francesina is extremely improved, her notes are more distinct, and there is something in her running divisions that is quite surprising."²⁴⁹ Surprising indeed. When compared to the rather modest music Handel wrote for *La Francesina*'s previous roles—Clotilde (*Faramondo*), Romilda (*Serse*), Deidamia (*Deidamia*), Rosmene (*Imeneo*), and Michal (*Saul*)—the technical demands required by this last aria seem excessive, even outrageous. One might even say that Semele's death is the price she pays for singing too much.

Yet again Semele's unusual music seems to satirize the music of Handel's competitors, and though it is unclear whether the vocal extremes of this last aria were specifically meant to target Veracini, we get a rare insight into Handel's own opinion of his rival's music in the same letter from Lord Hervey, quoted above. At the 1735 premiere of Veracini's *Adriano in Siria*, Hervey observed:

Handel sat in great eminence and great pride in the middle of the pit, and seemed in silent triumph to insult this poor dying opera in its agonies, without finding out that he was as great a fool for refusing to compose, as Veracini had shown himself by composing.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁹ Deutsch, 582.

²⁵⁰ See n. 40.

Whatever Handel's reasons might have been for setting Semele's final aria in the so-called "Veracini style", we can be certain that reverent emulation was not one of them.

A LAST LOOK IN THE MIRROR

Mary Delany once noted that Handel's music for *Semele* was "quite new and different from anything he has done," an observation that still rings true today.²⁵¹ From the meandering lines and fastidious trills of the mirror aria and "The morning lark" to the virtuosic excesses of Semele's outrageous final request, one hears a different kind of voice resounding throughout this unusual work, one that unmistakably echoes the music of Handel's Italian contemporaries. The source of this voice is Semele herself, whose arias tend to conflate the meaning of her words with her own act of singing them: in her persistent gazing, in the warbling sound of her distress, or in the "full excess" of her vocal prowess, Semele all too often seems to turn this precautionary tale for ambitious women into an allegory about opera itself. Indeed, it seems no accident that none of these arias have direct antecedents in *Metamorphoses*, the mythological source for Congreve's libretto; as Jon Solomon has pointed out, the only myth in Ovid to bear any similarity to Semele's mirror scene is the story of Narcissus.²⁵² Semele's astonishing reflexivity, it seems, is a purely operatic invention.

²⁵¹ Deutsch, 579.

²⁵² On the classical origins of Congreve's libretto, see Jon Solomon, "Reflections of Ovid in Semele's Mirror," *Music & Letters*, 63 (1982), 227-241. The mirror scene and the lark aria have no corollary in *Metamorphoses*, and though Ovid's Semele does ask Jupiter to cast off his mortal form, she only asks once.

Yet, if Handel's 'secular oratorio' is really nothing but "a bawdy opera," it is one that continually draws attention to that distinction, and thereby provides a unique vision of Italian opera refracted through Handel's perspective. By using Semele's voice as a vehicle for satire, Handel seems to have given himself an opportunity to lash back at those who had once lashed out at him. In this way, *Semele* might ultimately be seen to represent Handel's own glance in the mirror: it reveals him reflecting on the end of opera as he knew it, at a time when musical taste and operatic culture were undergoing inexorable change. If his personal vision of Italian opera at mid-century was a jaded one, it doesn't appear to have soured his sense of humor. Like the Austrian emperor, faced with the deluge of his enemies' decadent trills, Handel simply sat back, and laughed.

EPILOGUE: *SEMELE* AND THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY STAGE

It may seem strange that what was once likely intended as an operatic satire has in our own time become one of Handel's most cherished operas. The fact that critics today often cite *Semele*'s mirror aria and her virtuoso finale as her finest moments suggests that *Semele* owes much of its current popularity to its extravagant music. If, however, the parodic context surrounding *Semele*'s creation has been long forgotten, its elements of parody have not. Just as Charles Jennens called *Semele* a "bawdy opera" two-and-a-half centuries ago, so too have stage directors given us much to laugh at in their own productions, where comic gags abound.

For example, in John Copley's staging of Juno's Act II aria, "Iris hence away," the frustrated Iris tries repeatedly to leave the stage, only to be dragged back on by Juno, who all the while continues to tell Iris to "hence away."²⁵³ A televised broadcast of Robert Carsen's *Semele* at the English National Opera confirmed the 'speedy flight' Juno and Iris take with an airline ticket Juno finds while rummaging through her purse in an extended cadenza.²⁵⁴ And lest we forget, there is the mirror scene, which has ubiquitously become the comic centerpiece of productions today, giving singers and directors endless

²⁵³ John Copley, dir., San Francisco Opera, November 4-25, 2000 (orig. production, 1982), cond. Charles Mackerras and William Lacey, with Ruth Ann Swenson (*Semele*), Sarah Connolly (Ino/Juno), and John Mark Ainsley (Jupiter).

²⁵⁴ Robert Carsen, dir., English National Opera (London), May 15, 1999, cond. Harry Bicket, with Rosemary Joshua (*Semele*), Susan Bickley (Juno), and John Mark Ainsley (Jupiter),

opportunities for turning the already humorous situation into high camp. In Copley's staging, Juno shows Semele the mirror, only to pull it away again, causing a brief onstage tug of war between the two larger-than-life personalities. A recent Arizona Opera production by Chas Rader-Schieber featured servants working feverishly throughout the aria to bring Semele larger and larger mirrors in which to gaze.²⁵⁵ Moreover, most settings of the mirror aria invariably present Juno, bored to tears, yawning, glancing at her wristwatch, and even falling asleep as she waits for Semele's persistent gazing to finally end.

What all of these productions share is a heightened awareness of the problems that arise whenever operatic conventions fail to match the stage action, or when a singer's real-life persona confronts the character she plays. That is, in live performance Iris cannot "hence away" until Juno, in her da capo, has finished telling her to leave (and in fact, an oratorio staging would have given Iris literally nowhere to go). Similarly, Juno's mock-resentment of Semele's endless aria is not easy to distinguish from the potential jealousy of a *seconda donna* envious of her leading rival's vocal prowess. In other words, the stage frames that were blurred by the mirror scene, and all but obliterated by Handel's original staging concept, are in recent productions brought vividly to the foreground by their refusal to take *Semele*'s stage representation at face value.

²⁵⁵ Chas Rader-Schieber, dir., Arizona Opera (Tucson and Phoenix), January 20-29, 2006, cond. Joel Reyzen, with Lisa Saffer/Nathalie Paulin (Semele), Stephanie Blythe (Juno/Ino), and Scott Ramsay (Jupiter).

In this story about an ambitious young girl's rise to fame, many directors have instead looked to real-life celebrities for modern analogies to Semele's fate, and in so doing, have made interesting statements about opera singing, star celebrity, and the technologies that circumscribe them.²⁵⁶ For example, Robert Carsen's setting, which first appeared in 1996 at Aix-en-Provence, moves the action to modern-day Britain, where Juno appears as Queen Elizabeth, vigorously protecting her crown. Carsen's original version presented Semele as a blossoming Princess Diana, a detail that was cut after her all-too-real death the following year.²⁵⁷ Chas Rader-Schieber places *Semele* in Studio 54-era New York, featuring apartment-loft stage sets that take on the gigantic proportions of Andy Warhol's pop-art murals.²⁵⁸ And at the New York City Opera in the Fall of 2006, Stephen Lawless took us to the 1950s, dramatizing Semele's ascent to the heavens by transforming her into a bubbling Marilyn Monroe, her rival into a cold, calculating Jackie Kennedy, yet another vivid example of popular culture's obsession with the early deaths of beautiful, famous women.²⁵⁹

What is remarkably consistent about these productions is the heavy emphasis they place on mass media, those reproductive technologies that have always made modern

²⁵⁶ For a detailed discussion of opera production and its potential importance to academic scholarship, see David J. Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

²⁵⁷ Helen E. Elsom, "The Ways of Gods," review of Robert Carsen's ENO production, November, 2004. ConcertoNet online, <http://www.concertonet.com/scripts/review.php?ID_review=2705> (accessed 5 November, 2012).

²⁵⁸ For an account of the production, see Sherilyn Forrester, "Handel Opera in Modern Setting," *Arizona Daily Star*, January 19, 2006.

²⁵⁹ Stephen Lawless, dir., New York City Opera, September 13-October 4, 2006, cond. Anthony Walker, with Elizabeth Futral (Semele), Vivica Genaux (Juno), and Robert Breault (Jupiter).

celebrity possible. At the 2003 Buxton Festival, Semele's meteoric rise was staged as a TV talk-show interview, which took place in a raised frame above the stage, as Semele's friends and family members watched enviously from below.²⁶⁰ Similarly, Fred Berndt's production from 1995 envisioned Semele as a 1920s silent film star, who, during Jupiter's Act III aria, "Come to my arms," shoots a seductive bedroom scene with Jupiter at the camera's helm.²⁶¹ Robert Carsen publicized the opera's action in newspaper headlines that ironically comment on both the mythological story and on our own fascination with celebrity gossip: "Jupiter and Semele – It's Official," announces one paper; "Jupiter Semele Shock," reads another; and a tabloid magazine gives a fictional picture portrait of "Juno with her husband in happier times." A similar concept pervades the vision offered by Stephen Lawless, who in an ingenious touch presents Semele singing her mirror aria not to a mirror, but to her own image plastered across the glossy covers of *Goddess* magazine, each issue a detailed recreation of Marilyn Monroe's real-life cover photos (Fig. 9).

²⁶⁰ Stephen Langridge, dir., Buxton Festival, July 7-19, 2003, cond. Harry Christophers, with Helen Williams (Semele), Natasvha Petrinsky (Juno/Ino), Tom Randle (Jupiter). For a review, see Anthony Arblaster, *The Independent*, July 22, 2003.

²⁶¹ Fred. Berndt, dir., Händel-Festspiele (Halle), June 9-11, 1995, cond. Howard Arman, with Janet Williams/Claire McFadden (Semele), Niels Giesecke (Jupiter), and Patricia Spence/Catherine Denley (Juno). For production photos, see Ivan A. Alexandre, "Introduction au commentaire," in *Sémélé: L'Avant-Scene Opéra* 171 (1996): 56-7.

Figure 9) *Semele*, Act III, Scene 3 (Mirror Scene), Elizabeth Futral as Semele, dir. Stephen Lawless, New York City Opera, October 2006.



The media central to all of these productions would seem to make our modern vision of *Semele* inseparable from the mechanical production and reproduction of celebrity—an astounding fact when one considers that the work was never meant to be staged at all. Handel’s previous effort to ridicule diva behavior by stripping away the theatrical frame, conflating the singer with her mirror image, has become in these productions a celebration of famous women and a proliferation of frames and images. But even if the depictions of celebrity and technology presented by *Semele*’s performance history seem to be diametrically opposed, they also revolve around a central idea, and may provide an important contribution to our understanding of the place of opera both in Handel’s time and in our own.

A final example offers a clue as to what that might be. John La Bouchardière’s production of *Semele* at the Scottish Opera in 2005 is based upon a single brilliant conceit: that Semele and her human friends and family are merely singers who believe that they are performing an oratorio, while the gods exist on an exalted plane, in the special realm of opera.²⁶² Ostentatious Baroque costumes and histrionic gestures mark the gods as different, and their intrusion into the oratorio framework initiates the complications of the drama. At first, Semele, dressed in black concert attire, is drawn into Jupiter’s operatic orbit via a fast-paced cab ride, which Juno and Iris witness as a film projected onto the theater wall—yet another telltale sign of *Semele*’s modern-day mechanical

²⁶² John La Bouchardière, dir., Scottish Opera (Glasgow and Edinburgh), February 19 - March 4, 2005, cond. Christian Curnyn, with Lisa Milne (Semele), Susan Bickley (Ino/Juno), and Jeremy Ovenden (Jupiter). For a description of the production, see Helen E. Elsom, “The Thin Slice,” on Concerto.net <http://www.concertonet.com/scripts/review.php?ID_review=2804> (accessed November 5, 2012).

renaissance. Unlike other productions, however, La Bouchardière's *Semele* does not achieve her apotheosis in Act II, where she passes the time perched on a heavenly pillow-bed. Rather, it is only when she looks into Juno's magic mirror that *Semele* is transformed, not into a goddess or a Hollywood actress, of course, but into an opera star. The diva is born before our very eyes. The mirror scene, which in Handel's oratorio had reduced *Semele*'s divine features into a caricature of a spoiled soprano, here, as pure opera, equates the diva with divinity itself, and leads us to wonder whether this hadn't been the meaning of *Semele* all along.

Even as an allegory about celebrity, *Semele* has never been merely a cautionary tale about the tragic fates that await ambitious women. Rather, its story has been used to explore our own myths about the search for goddesses on earth, the theatrical apparatus that constructs them, and the ultimate impossibility of their true representation. Whether stripped of stage technology or multiplied by the means of mass production, the diva is always marked, standing apart from the drama and signifying beyond the role she plays. In some ways she represents all women who are given a striking public voice. Just as the excess of mass media, then, works both to exalt and eventually destroy our cultural icons, so too does *Semele* both ennoble and annihilate its heroine via the trappings of the stage and the excessiveness of her music. The multiple histories that surround *Semele*'s birth and death offer a vision of opera that reveals it to be both parody and eulogy, origin and reflection. Yet, while doing so, all of these histories remarkably manage to maintain their sense of humor. It is perhaps this last point that represents the most important lesson

Semele can teach us about the delicate art of opera: that we often have to learn to laugh at the things we love.

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